

CAPTAIN W E JOHNS



Biggles

AND THE
LOST SOVEREIGNS

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BIGGLES AND THE LOST SOVEREIGNS

With a necklace of twenty golden sovereigns round his neck, a dead native is found drifting in a canoe among the islands off the Malay Peninsula. Had the money any link with the cargo of twenty thousand like them on board the schooner *Vagabond* when it pulled out of Singapore more than twenty years before—and vanished!

GEOGRAPHICAL NOTE

THE MERGUI ARCHIPELAGO

Mergui is both a district and a small port on the Isthmus of Kra, the northern part of the Malay Peninsula. The town is not much more than a pearling station on the coast of Lower Burma, washed by the tropic waters of the Bay of Bengal in the Indian Ocean.

If the reader will look at his atlas he will see, off the coast, stretching for nearly 300 miles in an irregular line, a sprinkling of what might be fly specks. These are islands, and the whole is known as the Mergui Archipelago. There are hundreds of islands, mostly of a rocky nature but well furnished with timber and jungle. Some have sandy beaches, others are girt with mangrove swamps.

A few of the largest are inhabited, but the great majority are not, if we exclude a primitive tribe of seafaring natives, called Salones, who, in dug-out canoes and home-made boats, wander from island to island in search of food. This consists chiefly of crabs and limpets, although they will kill a wild pig or deer if an opportunity occurs. They have little idea of the value of money but make a precarious living by pearling, collecting edible birds' nests and *bêche de mer* (sea slugs, a Chinese delicacy) which they barter for rice, opium and alcohol, to which they are addicted.

They are harmless, simple people, living for the most part in their boats. They speak a language of their own, but some understand Malay from contact with the mainland. Naturally, from long association they know the islands and the waters round them better than anyone.

The reader may wonder why so many islands bear names of living creatures. The reason is not hard to find. Every island must have a name by which it can be identified if only for navigation purposes, and the islands of the world are almost beyond count. It has been estimated there are 10,000 in the Indian Ocean alone. How were names to be found for all of them?

A common practice of navigators in the great days of discovery, when the oceans of the world were for the first time being explored, was for men to name islands, or groups of islands, after themselves; but to avoid duplication this could only be done once. The same applied when captains named islands after their patrons—kings, princes, dukes and admirals. In a moment of fancy a captain would name an island after a member of his crew, perhaps the man who was the first to sight the new piece of land. In this way the islands of the Seven Seas were (and still are) dotted with the names of thousands of mariners now dead and forgotten.

Animals were another obvious choice, either from the shape of the island or because the particular animal was found there. To take a few at random, we have Dog Island, Cat, Cow, Bull, Calf, Goat, Elephant and Hog Islands. Other creatures were called in: Fish Island, Bird, Crane, Serpent and Whale Island, for examples. This did not prevent duplication, for there are several Egg Islands and at least six Wolf Islands. The vegetable world is represented by Cocos Islands (twice), Nut Island, Apple, Pine, Hazel and Raisin Island. There is an island for every day of the week, every season, and for every saint in the calendar. The Indian Ocean can boast of the Twelve Apostles.

Eventually there must have been a shortage of names, for we end up with Tin Can Island, and even a Hole-in-the-Wall Island.

W.E.J.

CHAPTER 1

A TRAGEDY RECALLED

The log, or what appeared to be a log, moved forward slowly and submerged in a swirl of greasy mud that threw up bubbles of evil-smelling gas. Police pilot Ginger Hebblethwaite, who had put a foot forward to use the supposed log as a stepping stone, withdrew it quickly, and held on more tightly to the tangle of roots that were his support. His eyes probed the green twilight around him. Seeing nothing of interest he mopped his dirt-streaked face with an already sweat-soaked handkerchief, and deciding there seemed little point in going on prepared to retire. He had had enough.

For this he was not to be blamed, for on the entire face of the earth there is not a more unpleasant, uncomfortable place, than a mangrove swamp. It is for this reason, no doubt, that no race of human beings has ever attempted to establish homes on such a site.

The glossy green mangrove is a strange tree both in appearance and habits, as indeed it has to be to survive. It is, in fact, a masterpiece of adaption to the conditions in which it flourishes. It occurs only in tropical or subtropical regions and then always on the coast where a river or surface water meets the sea. At such places the water is usually brown with silt, mud and decaying vegetable matter. On contact with salt water this is deposited to form shoals of stinking bottomless slime.

At low tide it can be observed that the tree does not rise in a single trunk but from a large number of tall, arched, stilt-like roots, creating an impression that it is growing upside-down. From the trunk and branches hang more roots. Near the water these break into several fingers. Reaching the mud they claw their way in to form yet another support. These roots and branches are generally encrusted with shellfish which form the staple food of the monkeys that live overhead. There are other strange creatures, too, on the branches, notably fish and eels that climb up out of the mud.

To thicken the tangle there are seedlings. These germinate on the branches and remain attached, always growing, until they have the appearance of Indian clubs with pointed ends. When they fall they go down deep into the mud and so another tree is born. These advance always onwards into the sea. Silt and rubbish collect about the roots eventually to form soil. During this process the original trees, now some distance from the sea, deprived of salt, begin to die off. They fall and their place is taken by ordinary forest trees. In this way, what was swamp becomes solid ground, and thus new land is constantly added to islands and continents.

If the stench of slime and putrefying vegetable matter, with its oily scum and the bubbles of gas it discharges, is nauseating, the reptiles and insects that make it their home, preying on each other, are creatures of a nightmare.

Crocodiles there are, of course, and snakes of all sizes and colours. Crabs and other crustaceans climb about over hideous bloated fungi, often brilliantly coloured. Biting and stinging bugs, beetles and mosquitoes, swarm in millions. In a word, hot, poisonous and fever-ridden, a mangrove swamp is without doubt the most unhealthy place in the world.

It is time, therefore, to discover what Ginger was doing in one.

It all began a month earlier when Air Commodore Raymond called Biggles to his office. 'How would you like to take a nice quiet holiday?' he asked.

'That depends on where it's to be,' returned Biggles suspiciously, reaching for a cigarette.

'How about the Mergui Archipelago? If my memory serves me you've been there before.'

'That's correct, sir. But it was a long time ago. In fact, before the war.'

'What took you there?'

'I was a civil pilot at the time. You must remember recommending me for the job of investigating the disappearance in the Indian Ocean of a number of cargo ships bound for the Far East and Australia with munitions. It turned out that certain people, in anticipation of the war, had the bright idea of establishing a submarine refuelling station in an old crater in the middle of Elephant Island. It could only be reached through a cave at low water.'

Recollection dawned in the Air Commodore's eyes. 'Of course. That's right. So much has happened that pre-war events tend to fade like a dream.'

'What I remember most about the islands, attractive though some of them are to look at, were the most hellish sand-flies I've ever struck anywhere. I hope you're not going to tell me that history is repeating itself and the same sort of thing is going on?'

'No. With so much trouble brewing everywhere I can't imagine anyone bothering with a lot of fiddling little islands.'

'Some of them are not so small—as tropic islands go.'

'I'll take your word for it. Still, something seems to be going on. I have a report here and I thought it would be a good thing to discuss it with you. It may not be such a queer business as it looks on paper.'

'As I assume the islands now belong to Burma, an independent state, is this any concern of ours?'

'Officially, that's a difficult question to answer. As the trouble seems to be at the southern end of the Archipelago, Thailand and Malaya may claim an interest in the offshore islands. However, I doubt if anyone would go to war over them.'

'Thinking of an operational base, they're some distance from Singapore, or even Penang.'

'That's true; but there are airfields, originally built by us, all down the Isthmus—Tavoy, Phuket, Alor Star—on the old Imperial air route. But before we go into this let me tell you what the fuss is about. It was started by the skipper of an ancient coaster of eighty tons, named the *Alora*, which operates

a service between Singapore and Tavoy, calling at villages with mail and mixed freight, and picking up on the way back rice, timber, hides and other local produce.'

'Who's this craft owned by?'

'A Chinese concern with its head office in Singapore. The skipper, who has a native crew, is a crusty old Scot named Macdonald. He seems to be a character, known to everyone as Mac. He's been on that particular run for more years than anyone can remember, so it follows that he knows the coast and the islands probably better than any other white man. He also knows all the local languages, and there are plenty. Once a year he lays up at Singapore to refit.'

'Are all these details really necessary?' queried Biggles.

'Yes, because it's on this man, and his character, that the story I'm going to tell you rests. To give you an idea. When Singapore fell to the Japs during the war he loaded up his old tub with refugees till her deck was awash and took them across to Sumatra. He did that several times under the noses of the Japanese, and in spite of being bombed and shot at by aircraft he managed to get away with it. When the Japs finally occupied Singapore he slipped away and hid his ship somewhere among the islands till it was all over.'

'Must be a stout feller.'

'He's obviously as tough as they make 'em. Now that's understood we can come to the point. Some time ago, when he was in Singapore, he walked into Government House, demanded to see the Governor, and tossed on his desk a piece of dirty cord on which had been strung—no, I won't ask you to guess what, because you couldn't, not in a hundred years. Sovereigns. Twenty golden sovereigns. Holes had been roughly bored through them so that together they formed a necklace.'

Biggles smiled. 'Very nice, too. Naturally, he'd be invited to explain how he'd come by this unusual piece of jewellery.'

'Of course. His story, and the truth of it needn't be doubted because remember he was under no obligation to show anyone what he'd found, was this. On his last return trip through the islands, where he'd gone to pick up a load of mangrove bark, which is used for tanning, he'd come upon a canoe with a dead man in it; an old man of one of the tribes that drift about the islands. The sovereigns were round his neck. The body was in no state for a post mortem examination, but a festering wound in the shoulder suggested he had been shot. Macdonald removed the necklace and dumped the body in the sea, which in that climate was about all he could do with it. Then, knowing the old man must have been a member of a party, or family group, he cruised about until he found it.'

'Hoping to learn where the coins had come from?'

'Naturally. That's what most people would do. Wouldn't you?'

'Too true.'

'Unfortunately the answer was not forthcoming.'

Biggles sighed. 'It seldom is when the metal is yellow.'

'The Salones, as apparently these natives are called, thought they knew who the dead man must be. Being old he had become quarrelsome and had been kicked out of the party. That was some time ago. They had seen nothing of him since. Macdonald showed them the necklace. They shook their heads. They had never seen it before. The old man hadn't got it when he had left them. They could offer no explanation as to where the thing had come from. They were not particularly interested. Living as they do they have little idea of the value of money, and they certainly wouldn't realize that the coins represented what to them would be a fortune.'

'Could they offer a suggestion as to why the old man had been shot?'

'No, but an odd point arises here. They weren't surprised, the reason being that they themselves had been shot at.'

'By whom?'

'They had no idea.'

'Queer. Obviously the old man wasn't shot for his gold chain or it would have been taken—unless of course he got away wounded and died later. Yet, but for the gold, who would have any reason for killing the old man?'

'I can't imagine. Anyhow, this was making life difficult for the wretched natives who didn't know why they had been shot at or if it was likely to happen again. They had to land for food.'

'Did Macdonald do anything about it?'

'He had a look round some of the nearest islands, but he found nothing. He couldn't go on. He had his job to do. The south-west monsoon was due and he was anxious to get to Singapore before the bad weather broke.'

'Was anything more done about this?'

'Oh yes. Singapore asked the Burmese Government if they had heard of any trouble in the islands. They said no. They had no objection to a British ship having a look round if it was thought necessary. So the navy sent along a frigate.'

'Presumably hoping to get on the track of the sovereigns.'

'Of course. There was a very good reason. Some landings were made, but nothing was found. That wasn't surprising. It would be a tremendous task to comb all the islands thoroughly.'

'And there the matter rests, as they say.'

'For the moment.'

'You say there was a good reason for the search; which I take to mean the government thinks there may be more sovereigns where those on the necklace came from.'

'They don't merely think. They know.'

'Ah! Now we're getting down to it. Carry on, sir.'

'Those twenty sovereigns formed a part of a specially minted consignment of twenty thousand sent before the war to a British bank in Singapore.'

'How is it possible to be certain of that? One sovereign is identical with

another.'

'Not entirely. Dates can be different, and usually are. As I have said, these were mint new, and every one bore the same date—1938. The Bank of England has confirmed that these were the only gold coins showing that date sent East. On arrival at the bank at Singapore they were put in the vault as a gold reserve and not touched again until February 1942, when the Japs were so close it was clear Singapore was doomed. In the hope of preventing the gold from falling into the hands of the enemy, the money, still in its original packing of lead foil, was taken from the vault and put aboard a British-owned luxury schooner of ninety tons, named *Vagabond*, which was going on to Calcutta. It didn't arrive. In fact, after the *Vagabond* left Singapore, it was never to our knowledge seen again.'

'So we begin to see chinks of daylight in the mystery of the golden necklace,' murmured Biggles. 'Why put the stuff on a schooner? I should have thought a battleship —'

'The navy was too busy doing other things. At that time the gold was of minor importance. In any case it would have come to the same thing at the end. I needn't remind you that the two battleships available, the *Repulse* and the *Prince of Wales*, both went to the bottom of the Gulf of Siam. There is now good reason to suppose that the *Vagabond*, running into trouble, bad weather, or more probably from enemy action, made for the islands and either beached herself or went down in shallow water. The *Vagabond* was a wooden ship, so by the time the war ended, roughly four years later, there wouldn't be much sign of her unless she was thrown high and dry.'

'Something of the sort must have happened or it would not have been possible for that old native to hang some of the sovereigns round his neck. Obviously, he found the wreck of the *Vagabond*, and being alone was the only living person to know where it lay.'

'And now, being dead, he can't show anyone the spot.'

'I wonder if the gold had anything to do with his being shot,' said Biggles thoughtfully. 'I take it no survivors of the *Vagabond* have ever turned up?'

'Not one.'

'If that is correct it means that today, apart from a few government officials, there isn't a living soul who knows about the gold.'

'So we must assume.'

'A lot of people may have taken refuge on the islands during the Japanese occupation of the mainland.'

'No doubt, but they'd hardly be likely to stay there when the war was over.'

'Someone may have seen the wreck of the *Vagabond* when he was there.'

'That's possible; but he wouldn't know about the gold stored below her deck. And if he contemplated salvage he wouldn't wait for nearly twenty years.'

'True enough,' conceded Biggles. 'But I can't help feeling it may be more

than a coincidence that the one man we know who must have found the gold, was shot. What's happening there at the moment?"

'Nothing as far as I know. How do you feel about flying out and having a look round? You could cover a lot of ground in an aircraft and there's a chance you might spot something from the air—even under water.'

'What's wrong with letting the RAF, or Fleet Air Arm, have ago?'

'That wouldn't do.'

'Why not?'

'Aircraft carrying British military markings might start something. At present everything is quiet, but any show of air activity would be sure to start rumours. One whisper of gold and you can imagine what it would lead to. Every country within striking distance would lay claim to the islands, even perhaps India, who now owns the Andaman Islands, which are not far off. Chinese junks, ostensibly fishing, would appear. We don't want to start trouble. This must be kept quiet.'

'Wouldn't what you've just said about the RAF apply equally to me?'

'No. Not a civil aircraft. You might be surveying for timber concessions. Or, if questions were asked, you could work the same cover story you've used before. Take a cine-camera and say you're making a travel or adventure film for British Television. A lot of people seem to be doing that nowadays, even in the most inaccessible places.'

'That's an idea. All right, sir. If I'm going I shall have to ask you some more questions. You have the file. I imagine you've studied it.'

'Very carefully. What do you want to know?'

Biggles paused before he went on. 'As you know, sir, I dislike anything to do with gold. It's dangerous stuff. It can send men gibbering mad. Gold and trouble go together like bacon and eggs. The more people who know, or suspect, there's a heap of sovereigns lying somewhere in the Archipelago, the more certain the trouble. How many people could have known anything about it? Let's start with Macdonald and this old craft of his, the *Alora*. How many people saw him take that bunch of sovereigns off the dead man's neck?'

'It's hard to say. Probably everyone on board. The chances are all the crew would be on deck, looking over the side at the canoe. It wouldn't be easy to hide a string of gold coins even if Macdonald thought it advisable. I doubt if such a thought would occur to him. He runs the ship with a crew of five.'

'You say runs. Does that mean he's still doing the same job?'

'Oh yes. It's his life. He'll go on till he drops dead or the *Alora* falls to pieces under him. He's that sort of man. At the time he found the necklace the crew were a mixed lot, as is usual in that part of the world. The chances are they're still with him. You'll have to ask him. At the time, according to a note in this file, his bosun was a Malay, named Laon. The engineer was an Indian. The cook was Chinese. The two hands were Burmese. This was his regular crew and they'd all been with him for some time.'

'You said Macdonald sometimes picked up a passenger. Was he carrying

one on this occasion? What I'm getting at is, how many people saw Macdonald find that gold necklace?'

'I don't know. There's no record here of a passenger, although there may have been one. When Macdonald came on the canoe he was on his way south from Tavoy, making for Singapore, having called at several villages. It was when he arrived at Singapore that he reported what he had found.'

'He's an honest man, anyhow. There was nothing to prevent him from keeping the sovereigns. He'd know they would now be worth a great deal more than their face value. Has he been told that they were part of a consignment of twenty thousand?'

'I would hardly think so. Naturally, every effort would be made to keep the facts secret. But when he learned, as he certainly would, that a naval frigate had for no obvious reason been messing about among the islands, not being a fool it wouldn't take him long to put two and two together.'

'What happened to the coins he found?'

'I don't know; but I imagine he'd be asked to hand them over.'

'He'd get compensation, of course.'

'Presumably.'

'All right. So much for the *Alora*. Now this schooner *Vagabond*, which disappeared. How much is known about her?'

'She was owned by a retired English business man named Drew. He was obviously well off because he was fulfilling an ambition to sail round the world in his own time. He had a crew of eleven, all British, which was perhaps one of the reasons why he was entrusted with the money. He was making his way home from Australia when he put in at Singapore.'

'He struck an unlucky moment.'

'Conditions couldn't have been worse. Everyone had only one thought, and that was to get out before the Japs arrived. For all we know Drew may have taken some refugees on board. With everything in a state of chaos it's unlikely that anyone would know about that. So the fact is, we don't know for certain who was aboard the *Vagabond* when she sailed; and as she has been presumed lost with all hands it's unlikely we shall ever know. One thing we do know is she must have left her course to reach the islands; and she must have reached the islands or how could that old native have got part of her cargo round his neck?'

'Quite a problem,' murmured Biggles, slowly stubbing his cigarette. 'In what month did Macdonald find the canoe?'

'In May.'

'North-east monsoon, so the weather would be fine.'

'That's right. He wanted to get to Singapore before it broke in June.'

'I think my best plan would be to start by finding Macdonald and getting from him his position when he found the canoe. Taking that spot as a centre I could work the islands around it. Even there I can see a snag. These natives, the Salones, are always on the move and over a period of time they cover long

distances; which is why the Malays call them sea gypsies. That old man with the necklace might have picked up the coins a hundred or more miles from where he was shot, or where Macdonald found him. Even after he was dead the canoe could have drifted a long way in the maze of currents that divide the islands.'

'Well, I shall have to leave it to you to see what you can make of it.'

Which brings us back to the point where we began; and it will not be necessary to explain why Ginger was exploring a mangrove swamp in the Mergui Archipelago.

CHAPTER 2

CAPTAIN MACDONALD SPEAKS HIS MIND

It was three weeks after the conversation in the Air Commodore's office that Biggles, in the Air Police twin-engined amphibious aircraft *Gadfly*, with his assistant pilots Bertie and Ginger on board, arrived at Singapore. There had been a lot to do: charts to be studied; the geography of the Archipelago, particularly of the larger islands, to be memorized, and, by discussion, a broad plan of procedure made. Even more important, carnets for the requisition of petrol and oil had to be organized for wherever these were available along the coast of the mainland. There would be no fuel on the islands; and the only food, apart from what the aircraft could carry, what they themselves could obtain with gun or fishing lines.

The *Gadfly* would, of course, carry stores to its capacity, but even if these were restricted to essentials they would not last long. Other things would have to be taken, and Biggles, knowing from experience that the success or failure of such operations are often decided on the ground before the start, went into the question of what should be taken with a great deal of care.

To have to go to Singapore, 800 miles away, or even Penang, nearly 500 miles, every time they needed fuel, or anything else, would mean the aircraft spending much of its time doing that and nothing else. In fact, more petrol would be used in this way than on the actual search.

Biggles had hopes of making an arrangement with Macdonald for the *Alora* to establish one or two dumps of supplies on beaches where this would be possible, the actual spots to be decided by the knowledgeable sailor. In short, distances were a major problem. As Biggles more than once remarked, the Archipelago was no place to risk running out of petrol.

So all the preliminaries, while routine, took time. When complete Biggles flew out to Singapore in the hope that as the fine weather season had only just begun he would find Macdonald still there. In this he was to be disappointed. The *Alora* had already left on its first northward trip ten days earlier. There was only one thing to be done and that was follow it, overtaking it either on the open sea or at one of its ports of call.

So after a day's rest to recover from the long flight out from England, the *Gadfly*, having topped up its tanks, took off again, and back-tracking its own route came on the *Alora* at Victoria Point, a somewhat decrepit little port at the southern tip of Burma and opposite the south end of the islands forming the Mergui Archipelago. The *Alora* had tied up against the dilapidated jetty, and was about to cast off when Biggles taxied alongside and hailed the only white man he could see aboard, without any doubt, from his appearance, the skipper.

Captain Macdonald was exactly as Biggles had visualized him. He was the

typical sea-dog type; the sort of sailor who has lived a life at sea the hard way. They are to be found in all the odd corners of the oceans, taking trouble as it comes as they do jobs that would daunt any but the stoutest hearted. He was short, square-shouldered, with calculating blue eyes; shirt sleeves rolled up to show tattooed arms; a salt-stained peaked cap perched at a rakish angle on the back of his head. The colour of his skin had been tanned to tawny by the sun, with a yellowish tinge that spoke eloquently of recurrent fever. A pointed, grizzled red beard well streaked with grey, may have exaggerated a truculent expression. His teeth were clamped on a stubby black tobacco pipe.

With slow deliberation he walked aft, and resting his hands heavily on the taffrail, looked down. 'Mind what you're aboot,' he warned. 'Scratch my paint and by God ye'll be sorry.'

It took Biggles all his time not to smile at the idea of a delicate aircraft wing damaging the rust-streaked iron side of the old coaster. He suspected the Scot hadn't much time for aeroplanes. 'May I come aboard?' he called.

'What do you want?' was the uncompromising answer.

'A word with you.'

Acquiescence was conveyed by a grunt and a nod.

Carefully, Biggles manoeuvred the *Gadfly* to the jetty well clear of the ship. 'Watch her,' he told the others as he prepared to climb up. 'If we so much as graze that old hulk we've had it.' Reaching the top of the jetty he walked along, boarded the *Alora* and joined her skipper on the deck.

'What is it?' inquired Macdonald, without removing the pipe from his teeth.

Biggles glanced around to make sure no one was within earshot. 'Mr. Macdonald,' he said earnestly. 'I've been sent out by the British Government to try to find the spot where those sovereigns you found were picked up.'

Macdonald's eyes narrowed. He regarded Biggles with frank disfavour. Without haste he removed the pipe from his mouth and very deliberately spat overboard. 'So that's it,' he breathed. 'We'el, ye can awa' hame and tell your bluidy government they'll get na' help from me.'

Knowing the skipper's reputation, Biggles was prepared for a cool reception, but not for such blunt hostility as this. Obviously something had happened to upset the old man, something of which he was in ignorance. The problem was to find out what it was without making matters worse. To gain time while he adjusted himself to the situation he took out his pack of cigarettes and offered one. It was refused with a gesture of disdain. He took one himself, tapped it on the back of his hand and lit it.

'I'm sorry you should feel like that about it, Mr. Macdonald,' he said evenly. 'Naturally I was relying on you for information. If the government has annoyed you, and I can see it has, I don't think you should hold me responsible. I have a difficult job to do as well as you. Knowing the sort of man you are, I'm sure any complaint you have must be justified. All I ask you to do is tell me what it is and so give me a chance to put things right.'

‘I don’t need anyone to put anything right for me,’ growled Macdonald. ‘I can stand on my own feet.’

‘I’m sure you can. So can I if it comes to that. All right, skipper. Have it your own way. I don’t ask favours. But don’t nurse that grudge of yours too long or it’s liable to give you indigestion.’ Biggles half turned as if to go; then, as if as an afterthought, he added: ‘Would it be something to do with the money you found? What became of it?’

‘How the hell would I know?’

Biggles turned back, staring. ‘Are you telling me they took it off you?’

‘Aye. After I’d been fool enough to hand it over I never saw it again.’

‘But you must have got full value in compensation!’

‘Not a brass farthing. I didna want the bloody money, but I was entitled to know who it belonged to. Who says the government had any right to it?’

So that was the trouble, thought Biggles, mentally cursing the stupidity of some official department for allowing this to happen. Macdonald had every reason to be disgruntled. In his ignorance of the facts he would naturally suppose he had a claim to the money. Indeed, even as things were he might be entitled to it. For the department handling the matter at Singapore to leave him out of the picture was inexcusable.

He went on: ‘I agree with you, skipper, absolutely. But of this I am sure. Eventually this will be straightened out. Government departments don’t move at a rate of knots as people like you and me have to.’

‘It takes these pen-pushers at Singapore a hell of a time to move at all. They’ll get no more out of me.’

Here Biggles nearly made a blunder. ‘Have you complained about this treatment?’

Macdonald bristled like an angry dog. ‘Complain! What am I supposed to do, go crawling on ma hands and knees like a starving coolie?’

‘Certainly not,’ declared Biggles quickly.

‘I should bloody well say not,’ snorted Macdonald.

Biggles went on: ‘I’ve just flown up from Singapore. I shall now go straight back and play hell about the way you’ve been treated, and—’

‘I don’t want an apology,’ broke in Macdonald belligerently.

‘I wasn’t thinking of that. I’d see that someone got a crack over the knuckles for being so damned discourteous. But before I go I’m going to tell you, in confidence, something you have every right to know. There’s more to this than you may imagine. It could explain why you’ve been kept in the dark—as a matter of general security. Let’s sit down—or are you in a hurry to get away?’

‘The next tide’ll suit me.’

When they had found seats on some drums of paraffin which formed part of the deck cargo Biggles continued: ‘Those sovereigns you found were part of a big consignment lost twenty years ago.’

‘Then why couldn’t they have said so?’ returned Macdonald in a more

mollified tone of voice.

‘It was some time before anyone realized it. It took quite a while to sort out the facts. That had to be done in London. Government departments are slow. I’d be the last man to deny that. But eventually, by their own devious methods, they usually get somewhere. Now then. I know you were at Singapore just before the Japs took over. Do you by any chance remember a schooner by the name of *Vagabond* lying there? She’d be flying the Red Duster.’¹

‘I never forget a ship,’ asserted Macdonald. ‘I remember her fine. Pretty little craft. I saw her leave.’

‘But you don’t know what happened to her?’

‘No. Do you?’

‘Nobody knew until you found those sovereigns. When she left Singapore bound for Calcutta she had on board twenty thousand gold sovereigns exactly like those you found round the neck of that dead Salome. Every one had the same date. They’d been sent out to a bank in Singapore, before the war, as a gold reserve. When it was certain the place would have to be evacuated the gold was put aboard the *Vagabond* to be taken to Calcutta. It never got there. In view of what must have happened they’d have done better to put the money on the *Alora*.’

Macdonald recharged his pipe with a calloused thumb.

‘So the schooner was lost.’

‘From the day she sailed she was never seen again. Of course, that happened to a lot of other ships about that time. She could have gone down anywhere, so nobody bothered much about her until you found those sovereigns. It’s now realized that she must have ended her life somewhere among the islands, otherwise part of her cargo couldn’t have found its way there.’

‘So *that’s* what that frigate was looking for,’ remarked Macdonald shrewdly.

‘Quite right. It didn’t find anything.’

‘I wouldn’t expect it to, a craft of that draught. She’d have to keep well clear or she’d be aground herself; and after twenty years there wouldn’t be much left of a wooden-built craft like the *Vagabond*. If she was driven into the mangroves somewhere you’d see nothing unless you were right on top of her.’

‘Exactly. They realize that now. That’s why I’ve been sent out. If what’s left of the *Vagabond* is lying in shallow water, from the air I might be able to spot her.’

Macdonald was now looking interested. ‘You been in these parts before?’

‘Yes. I was out here before the war, looking for the hideout of a submarine that was sinking our munition ships in the Indian Ocean.’

Macdonald looked up. ‘I remember that business. So it was you! Well, things haven’t changed much. What I still don’t understand is why I wasn’t

told about the lost schooner. I'm often among the islands and I might have done something about it.'

'I'd say that as soon as it was realized that twenty thousand pounds in gold, worth more than four times that amount in cash today, might be in the offing, the Security people clamped down tight on the whole business. We can guess what could have happened had the story leaked out. There might have been a real flare-up, everyone on the make-haste to claim the salvage. Everyone with a craft that would float, Burmese, Chinese, Siamese, the lot, would have made a bee-line for the islands and the result would have been a nice old carry-on, everyone shooting at everyone else. After all, that quantity of gold is worth fighting for. No doubt that's why the government decided to keep the whole thing under the hat, although to my mind that was no excuse for them not telling you. I'll go back to Singapore and tell 'em what I think about it. How do they expect me to find the money without help from you? I'll see to it you get your reward.'

'What if they kick?'

'Then, by thunder, I'll blow the whole story sky high in the newspapers. The government wouldn't like that to happen.'

Macdonald's blue eyes twinkled. 'I'm beginning to like you. I fancy we both speak the same language. What's your name?'

'Bigglesworth. Biggles for short.'

'All right, Mr. Biggles. Not being an unreasonable man, I'm beginning to take a different view of things. You needn't waste time going back to Singapore if to play hell on my account is the only reason. You started off by saying you thought I might be able to help you. What is it you want to know?'

'Before we come to the real questions there are one or two things that puzzle me. That old Salone must have found the bones of the *Vagabond*. He also found the sovereigns. Why did he only take twenty?'

'That's easy. He didn't realize the value of what he'd found. Twenty were quite heavy enough to hang round his skinny old neck. He'd probably have been happier with a few rupees, which he would have recognized.'

'You say he'd been shot.'

'That's how it looked to me.'

'And the Salones told you they had been shot at. Can you offer any explanation of why anyone should waste ammunition on these wretched natives?'

'I reckon it could only have been the crew of a Chinese junk trying to scare 'em away from their pearling ground. You may see some about presently. They pay a lump sum to the Burmese Government for the sole right to work a certain area for the season. Some come from quite a way off. They make for home before the bad weather starts. I'd say that old Salone fell foul of 'em.'

Biggles nodded. 'That's about the size of it. They could never have been close enough to the old man to see what he had round his neck or this would have been a different story. What I'm really anxious to know is how many

people saw you find those sovereigns. I know about your crew, if it's the same one. I believe you sometimes carry a passenger. Had you anyone on board, except your regular crew, when you found the gold necklace?"

'Aye, come to think of it. He was a Philippino pearl buyer from Manila. He used to come along regularly once a year. I knew him by the name of Feng. He'd make the trip both ways. Coming aboard at Singapore he'd go ashore wherever I stopped, always on the look-out for a nice pearl. Most people along the coast who have a boat, and they're a pretty mixed lot, do a bit of private pearling. Take this place, for instance. At least half a dozen nationalities live here, Malays, Chinese, Siamese, Tamils... to say nothing of mixed breeds. They seem to get along. Feng told me the trip was usually worth while. By the way, he spoke English—with an American accent. He may have picked it up from the US troops stationed in the Philippines, but I have an idea he'd been to the United States.'

'What sort of fellow was he?'

'As far as I know he was all right or I wouldn't have had him on my ship. The natives used to say he drove a hard bargain, but that was nothing to do with me. I'd say he was about thirty at the time I first knew him.'

'Did he see the sovereigns?'

'Couldn't help but see 'em. He wanted 'em too.'

'Wanted them?'

'Wanted to buy 'em, and say nothing to anyone about it.'

'The devil he did!'

'Aye. He always carried plenty of money on him, Malay dollars and rupees.'

'What did you say?'

'I told him the stuff wasn't mine to sell.'

'He must still have been with you when you found the Salones and talked to them?'

'Of course. He tried to persuade me to hang on a bit, reckoning that there must be more sovereigns about not far away. But I'd no time for that.'

'What finally happened to him?'

'God alone knows. When we got to Singapore he walked off, like he always did, and that was the last I saw of him.'

'And you haven't seen him since?'

'No, but I wouldn't expect to until the bad weather was over. I half expected him to be on this trip with me, but I didn't see him in Singapore and he hadn't been to the office to book his passage.'

'I see,' said Biggles pensively. 'Now, would you mind telling me where you were when you found the canoe with the dead Salone in it?'

'I was making south with Hog Island about two miles to starboard.'

'Is that where you found the party of Salones?'

'No. They'd tucked their stinking boats in a little inlet in Chochan Island.'

'Stinking?'

‘Aye. You can smell ’em a mile away.’

‘Why do they stink?’

‘Because the bilge in the bottom of their boats is a mess of rotting fish guts. They spend half their time in the water, fishing and pearling, and if they threw their muck overboard they’d have sharks following ’em.’

‘A very good reason. One other thing, skipper. I may be on this job for some time and this is where you can help me if you will. Strictly business, of course. I have some food on board, mostly hard tack, but I don’t want to have to keep going down to Penang for stores. Apart from the time it would waste, people would begin to wonder what I was up to. It struck me that if I gave you a list of stuff, and the money to pay for it, you could make one or two dumps at convenient islands, north and south, where I could pick up what I wanted as I needed it. That would save me looking for you and you looking for me.’

Macdonald considered the proposal. ‘There shouldn’t be much difficulty about that. We’ll have a look at the chart and between us we can decide on places convenient to both of us. Beaches would be the best place, well above the high-water mark. The stuff will have to be buried. The Salones are not thieves, but if they happened to drop on it they’d think it was a gift from heaven.’

‘I couldn’t blame ’em for that.’

‘A worse danger might be the hogs and the crocs. If they winded it, unless some rocks were piled on it they’d dig it out.’

‘Thanks. That’s a possibility I might have overlooked.’

Relieved that he had been able to pacify the tough old Scot, whose indignation at being kept in ignorance was understandable, Biggles followed him into his cabin where a large scale chart of the islands, very much the worse for wear and smothered with corrections, was opened flat.

‘If you’ve got a chart don’t put too much faith in it,’ warned Macdonald cynically. ‘To be reliable there’d have to be a fresh survey done every year. The bottom changes after every storm.’

‘You tell me what you suggest,’ requested Biggles. ‘What suits you should suit me. That aircraft of mine needs only a few inches of water to float, and it has wheels to go ashore if the ground isn’t too rough.’

Captain Macdonald, with furrowed brows, occasionally letting out a puff of tobacco smoke so rank that Biggles had to struggle not to cough, went over the islands with a stub of pencil that had seen better days. At last he made up his mind. ‘I’d say here, Chang Island, for the south, and here, Kampong Island for the north. They call it Kampong Island because some Malays once had a settlement there. They’ve gone now, but you can still see the ruins of the huts. Keep clear of ’em. They’ll be crawling with every kind of bug in creation. There’s a small herd of wild buffalo, too, sprung from those the Malays couldn’t catch when they left. They’re nasty brutes, so watch out.’

‘Then why choose the place?’

‘Because there’s a good beach and the water runs deep close in, which

would be handy for me landing the stores. I'd better mention that if the buffalo are close to what's left of the huts, there'll probably be a tiger about, too.'

'I don't get it.'

'Quite simple. The tigers often swim over to the nearest islands from the mainland. If the buffalo wind one they'll crowd near a *kampong*, reckoning to get some protection from the people who live in it. That comes from years of experience on the mainland.'

'I can see I shall have to be careful,' said Biggles seriously, as he made a quick sketch map marking the islands Macdonald had named.

'Do you speak Malay?' queried the skipper.

'Only an odd word or two.'

'Hm. If you can't talk I'm afraid you'll find things difficult. Malay is the general language here. The Salones understand it, more or less. What you really need with you is someone who knows the ropes. You could get a good man for three or four shillings a day, with his keep, which includes opium. They all eat opium. That's understood. It's the regular barter. Cheap enough. They grow the stuff just over the hills in Thailand.'

'I haven't got any.'

'Get yourself a pound or two. You can get it here, at any store.'

'I haven't got a man yet,' Biggles pointed out. 'I'd willingly take one on if I could find him.'

'If you're serious I know the very man for you. I was talking to him just before you arrived. He bosses the loading and unloading of my cargo here. He's a Malay. Lives in one of the dak bungalows you can see back o' the waterfront. Name's Chintoo. Married with some kids. He speaks a fair bit of English from having worked in the rubber plantations farther south. Not a bad cook, either. Useful all-round man. Would you like me to call him over?'

'I'd be very much obliged if you would. I'm sorry if I'm holding you up.'

That's all right. Nothing urgent. I might as well wait till morning, now. That'll give you a chance to make out your lists of groceries.'

They returned to the deck, where, cupping his hands round his mouth, the skipper let out a bellow that made Biggles jump. Also Bertie and Ginger who, having made fast, were sitting on the jetty regarded with awe by a party of children of all colours.

'Here he comes,' said Macdonald, who was watching the shore. 'I see you've got a crew.'

'Yes. Friends of mine. They're both pilots. I'll call them over when I've had a word with this chap.'

The Malay arrived at the double and leapt nimbly aboard. The skipper had a brisk conversation with him lasting two or three minutes, which gave Biggles an opportunity to cast an eye over his proposed interpreter.

At first sight he could not by European standards be called attractive. His age was not easily judged; he might have been anything between thirty and

forty. He was not much more than five feet tall, but he was well built with a good chest and shoulders. His skin was the colour of strong tea. His hair was black, straight and uncut. Like so many of his countrymen, he had no hair on his face. His forehead was high, his chin firm, but his nose was rather flat. His teeth were as usual stained red-brown from chewing betel-nut. His eyes were large, brown, intelligent and set well apart, but a disfiguring scar ran down his right cheek. All he wore in the way of clothes was a short *sarong*, or skirt, pulled tight at the waist, and a pair of obviously home-made sandals.

Said Macdonald, turning to Biggles, 'That's fixed that. He's ready to start any time you like. Pay, the same as I give him, and his keep. You'll find he's worth all that, and more,' concluded the skipper prophetically.

Smiling amiably, Chintoo bowed.

'Fine. He's my man,' confirmed Biggles without hesitation.

'He knows the islands like the back of his hands, so don't be afraid to take his advice. Where do you reckon to start your search, so I know where you're likely to be?'

'I should think Hog Island would be the best place. I could work outwards from there.'

'Couldn't do better. I'll have a word with you later about that.'

'Now meet my friends,' concluded Biggles. 'No doubt we shall all be meeting again.'

¹ Red Duster: slang term for the Red Ensign, flown by the British merchant navy. It is a plain red flag with a Union Flag design in the top left-hand corner.

CHAPTER 3

HOG ISLAND

The following morning at daybreak the *Alora* and the *Gadfly* parted company, the coaster heading northward on its regular run and the aircraft making for Hog Island, where it had been planned to establish a base camp from which the nearer islands could be explored. When this had been done the base would move farther north and the operation repeated.

Overnight, ashore at a Chinese tea house, over an excellent meal of curried rice and chicken, there had been a final talk with Captain Macdonald, at the end of which Biggles had handed to him his lists of stores and the money to pay for them. Chintoo had been given an advance of pay that he could leave his wife and children provided for during his absence.

The skipper told the airmen that things had changed little since the war, and what changes there had been were for the worse rather than the better. The reason, he thought, was because the native population, without the drive of the Europeans who formerly worked in the region, lacked the initiative to exploit the natural resources of the country, which included the islands. Too often their place had been taken by Burmese government officials, tax collectors and the like, who were open to corruption. He, Macdonald, was constantly having trouble with them.

There were fewer Salones and Mawkens (another native tribe that frequented the islands). Forced labour during the Japanese occupation had reduced their numbers and from this they had never recovered.

It need hardly be said that Biggles was well content with the way things had ended with the Scots skipper after such an unpromising beginning. The airmen felt they had made a friend as well as an ally. The one fact alone that Mac, as they now called him, had agreed to buy the stores Biggles had listed, and establish depots, was load off his mind, for this had been one of the major problems. Then it was on his advice that they had taken on Chintoo. They were soon to realize how much more difficult would have been their task without this simple-minded but efficient assistant.

His English was of a peculiar kind and was to provide the party with a good deal of amusement. He had a store of phrases which he must have picked up from the white plantation managers for whom he had once worked. These he had learned by ear, parrot-wise, so that he spoke them with practically no accent. Ginger was the first to discover this when the Malay, pointing to his reddish hair, remarked casually: 'That's lovely.'

His reactions to flying were those which, surprisingly, are common with unsophisticated natives almost everywhere. He had seen aircraft, but this was his first trip in one. Yet he behaved as if he had been doing it all his life. He showed no surprise, much less fear. Apparently the plane was just another

invention of these strange white men. What actually went on in his mind he did not reveal. From time to time he smiled at Ginger, with whom he was travelling in the cabin, Biggles and Bertie occupying the cockpit

It was a perfect day, cloudless, with just enough breeze to put a ripple on the water and so prevent it from looking dead. Visibility was practically unlimited, and from 2,000 feet the many islands and islets of the Archipelago presented a fascinating picture of natural beauty. Some had low shore lines with silver or golden beaches, others tall headlands of black rock with foreshores of detritus. Some were little more than reefs, but the larger ones all followed the same pattern, heavily wooded slopes with occasional flat areas of vivid green. Mangrove forests, always advancing into the sea, stood out dark and mysterious. On several islands, thin silvery streaks, marked cascades of water, the result of the recent monsoon, making their way to the sea.

Being well to the east of the big steamer track between Rangoon and Singapore, there was very little traffic to be seen; an occasional junk, with its huge sail looking like a curtain hung up to dry, a sampan or two near the coast, and here and there a canoe.

As the *Gadfly* winged its way across the blue sea, with the innumerable islands like emeralds dropped at random, the immediate future seemed all plain sailing. Ginger found the number of islands a trifle disconcerting, because to memorize the names of all of them, if in fact they had names, was obviously out of the question. It would have to be enough to remember the larger ones—Casuarina, St Luke's, St Matthew's, Elphinstone, King, Kochan, for instance. As Biggles had remarked earlier, it was one thing to look at an Archipelago on the map, but a different matter to see it in reality from the air. All they could do would be to treat the smaller islets as units that would have to be surveyed and struck off on the chart when this had been done.

Flying by dead reckoning there was little chance of the *Gadfly* getting off course, particularly as Hog Island, the objective, was one of the largest of a group, being about four miles long and nearly half that distance across. From its size it was soon possible to recognize it, a palm-fringed, tree-covered hump with the highest point in the middle. A pale sandy beach, filling a little bay, was conspicuous. It appeared to be the only one, the rest of the coastline being occupied either by a rocky foreshore or an extensive forest of mangroves rising directly from the water. Ginger, surveying it from the window as the aircraft drew near, looked in vain for human beings. He could see no boats, no smoke to suggest occupation. The whole thing considered, it was a typical tropic isle.

Biggles glided down to it, but before landing made a circuit at a low altitude of the entire island. The inspection revealing nothing of interest except a rivulet of water trickling into the sea at one end of the beach, he put the aircraft down in the bay, close in, and taxied on towards the curving strip of sand. This produced a result which, not unexpectedly, could not be said to improve the prospects of the island as a place of residence. At the near

approach of the plane several crocodiles, which had been basking in the sun, rose up on their legs and ran down into the sea. They did not go far. As the machine passed over them, so clear was the water that they could be seen resting on the bottom.

That knocks bathing on the head, thought Ginger.

Chintoo looked at him and smiled. 'If *boya* catch you push eyes out. He let go.' He demonstrated his meaning with his thumbs.

Ginger, hoping he would never have to put the operation to test, made a note of it; also that crocodiles were known locally as *boya*. 'Too many *boya*,' he remarked sadly.

'Lay eggs in mangroves,' informed Chintoo.

Biggles put down his wheels and trundled on up the beach to a spot some distance above the high-water mark, switching off and coming to rest about twenty yards from where jungle, thickets of bamboos, coconut palms and a few casuarina trees, straggled down to the sand.

Everyone got out.

'We should be all right here,' observed Biggles, looking around and lighting a cigarette. 'Let's get unloaded and make camp. Keep out of the water.'

'You needn't tell me,' replied Ginger. 'I saw the ugly brutes.'

Said Bertie: 'You know, old boy, I had an idea that crocs stuck to rivers.'

'Now you know better,' Biggles told him.

'What a bore. I was looking forward to a dip.'

'Forget it. Let's get fixed up.'

The next two hours were spent unloading enough stores for immediate use and the equipment they needed. The most important item was a light rectangular nylon tent. To save space in the aircraft the support poles had not been brought, but some stout bamboos were soon cut and served the purpose. Rolls of bedding, a blanket and groundsheet each, were put inside. Mosquito nets were slung. A rifle and a shot-gun were hung on the tent poles.

Bertie remarked that there did not seem to be too many mosquitoes about.

'Don't fool yourself; there will be,' answered Biggles grimly. 'By the grace of God the blood-sucking little devils only do their hunting after dark, otherwise life in a good many places would be impossible for people like us, with nice rich juice in their veins. That goes for animals, too. They have to cope with leeches as well. So shall we if we have to do any jungle work.'

While this had been going on Chintoo had not been idle. Without being told to do so he had shown his understanding of the situation by collecting rocks to build a fireplace and piling a supply of fuel beside it. He had also fetched a canvas bucket of water from the little stream. Now, with his *sarong* tucked up, *parang* (the heavy Malay jungle knife) in hand, he was busy cutting a quantity of strong bamboo poles.

Seeing him laying these out in a regular pattern Biggles asked him what he was doing.

‘Perhaps *boya* come tonight, Tuan,’ said Chintoo, seriously. He explained that he intended to build a palisade round the tent, and the shelter he had built for himself, to keep them out.

‘No doubt he knows what he’s doing,’ remarked Biggles with a shrug.

‘I’m beginning to understand why these charming little islands aren’t exactly overrun with tourists, if you see what I mean,’ said Bertie. ‘What else have we here to make life one long sweet song?’

Biggles grinned. ‘Snakes, dear boy. But don’t let ’em worry you. They’re not all poisonous. The pythons run to a fair size, but they look worse than they are. If you trip over one try to get clear of any trees. Without a tree to get his tail round the beast can’t get a real hold on you—so I’m told.’

‘Thank you very much,’ returned Bertie with biting sarcasm. ‘I’ll stay on the beach if you don’t mind.’

‘The cobra is probably the worst menace here, anyhow it is on the mainland, which is why I’ve put some serum in the medicine chest,’ went on Biggles. ‘Although they’re common, the chances of being struck by one are only about the same as being knocked down by a car at home. I believe about twenty thousand people die in India from snake bite every year, but they don’t talk about it, and it doesn’t keep them from going out.’

‘I don’t think that’s very amusing,’ stated Bertie coldly. ‘I had nightmares for a year after that anaconda got me by the leg in Brazil.’¹

Biggles laughed softly. He looked at the sky. ‘The weather seems to be set fair, but one can never be sure of it. They have a nasty type of storm here which they call a *sumatran*. It can pop up from nowhere any time of the year. To be on the safe side we’ll cut some pegs and have them handy ready to anchor the machine should the barometer start tumbling. We’d look silly if we woke up one morning to find she’d blown away.’

This was done. By the time it was finished Chintoo was calling from the fire to say dinner was ready. Again his efficiency was demonstrated when it turned out he had not only made a kettle of tea and had opened sugar and condensed milk, but had prepared a savoury dish of curried corned beef and rice. This provided a satisfying meal. Afterwards he washed up the plates and put them away. All this was done without any fuss as if from long practice, as probably it was.

‘Our new lad looks like being a treasure,’ said Bertie approvingly. ‘If there’s one thing that binds me rigid it’s kitchen-sinkery. We should have brought a washing machine, then no doubt old Chin-Chin would have turned out clean shirts for us every day.’

He need not have worried on that score, for it soon transpired that Chintoo could manage that—without a machine.

By the time everything was in shipshape order the sun was well past its zenith. Ginger said: ‘If that’s the lot I think I’ll give my legs a stretch while there’s some daylight left. I haven’t had any real exercise for a week.’ He moved off.

‘Where are you going?’ asked Biggles.

‘Only as far as the mangroves at the far end of the beach.’

‘Watch what you’re doing.’

‘I might find the wreck of the *Vagabond*. It’s as likely to be here as anywhere.’

‘Don’t be long.’

Ginger raised a hand to show he had heard and wandered on, whistling softly, looking at the strange shells, coral, and other fascinating objects that had been left high and dry by the tide. He noted the tracks made in the sand by the crocodiles.

He had second thoughts about going any farther when, with a small army of crabs waving their claws menacingly as they retreated before him, he came to the edge of the swamp and peered into its dim recesses. The tangle of roots, sprawling like the tentacles of octopuses, looked anything but inviting. The same could be said of black water that surged between them sluggishly with soft, sinister gurgling and sucking noises. The stench was abominable. However, sheer curiosity prompted him to advance a little way, climbing over the roots; but when he nearly stepped on a crocodile, as described earlier, he stopped, wondering if he was being wise to take risks for no particular purpose. A snake, almost white with yellow bands, gliding along a root a little way ahead, decided him, and he retired cautiously, glad when he was back on firm sand. He returned to the camp.

‘You weren’t long,’ said Biggles, as he joined them. ‘See anything?’

‘Enough to go on with. The place stinks. When I nearly put my foot on a croc trying to look like a log, that was it.’ Ginger settled down beside the others.

The sun sank, or appeared to sink, ever faster as it closed the gap with the horizon, resulting, as is usual near the equator, in a brief twilight.

Moving into the smoke of the still-smouldering fire to ward off attacks of the mosquitoes that were already on the war-path, there was a final discussion on the general plan of campaign and the programme for the next day. It had always been realized that the factor likely to retard progress in the operation was petrol and oil; that is to say, the shortage of it. It would not be possible to use the aircraft as if the supply was unlimited. Biggles had put these commodities on the lists he had given to Captain Macdonald, hoping he would be able to get aviation spirit at Alor Star or Penang, which was as far south as he went until he returned to Singapore to refit. Even if Macdonald was successful in this, they would have to wait until he had called at these sea and air ports. As the *Alora* carried mail there could be no question of it making special trips.

So, whatever happened petrol would have to be used sparingly, which meant a minimum of flying, as much work as possible being done on foot as each island was visited. To make a complete air survey of the Archipelago was not possible, at all events within a reasonable period of time.

The slight breeze that had tempered the heat of the day died away, and night closed in, still, silent and sultry, lit by a million stars that sprinkled diamonds on a sea that could hardly raise a ripple.

At last Biggles stubbed his cigarette end and said they might as well turn in to be ready for an early start in the morning.

They took their places in the tent, and having made themselves comfortable the light was switched off. But to sleep was a different matter.

Bertie was the first to sit up. 'I'm being torn to pieces,' he announced savagely. He switched on his torch to find his arms covered with minute black insects.

'Fire ants,' Biggles informed him, without moving. 'You can't do anything about 'em. The little devils can march through a mosquito net in columns of four. A shirt wrapped round your face might help, but then you simply choke to death in this heat. Please yourself. You know the old saying: "What can't be cured must be endured."'

'But this is murder,' growled Bertie.

Biggles chuckled. 'You're always saying you love the places where bananas grow. Well, this is one of 'em. You tear your mosquito net and you've had it, chum. Switch off that light before it attracts every kind of bug that flies.'

Bertie switched off his torch. 'What a life, what a climate,' he groaned.

¹ See *Orchids for Biggles*.

CHAPTER 4

THE FIRST SURVEY

The night passed, not without discomfort in the tent, but without serious alarm, although there were certain disturbing noises outside. These were more or less explained later.

It was the bustling about of Chintoo as he made up his fire that brought Ginger to his feet, and he went out to find the first flush of dawn staining a dead calm sea with reflected pink and gold. Chintoo greeted him '*Baik, Tuan,*' (very good, sir) at the same time pointing to trampled sand outside the palisade. '*Boya* come.'

So the crocodiles had been up on the beach, thought Ginger, although what the Malay could see good in it was not clear. Perhaps he meant it was a good thing he had built a palisade, in which case Ginger would have agreed with him.

Leaving it he walked down to the sea, astonished to observe the number of tracks made by creatures large and small during the night. There was hardly a square yard that had not been covered by something. The most easily recognized were the marks of crocodiles and pigs. They were now being washed out by the incoming tide, but it was disconcerting to note how close to the tent the crocodiles had approached. Chintoo had known what he was doing when he had built the fence.

In these circumstances there was no temptation to bathe, but after a close reconnaissance of the water Ginger stood in a few inches of it and had to be content with splashing himself. He perceived that even there he was not entirely safe, for V-shaped ripples not far out told their own story. Once, for a moment, he saw a pair of periscopic eyes regarding him malevolently.

He returned to the tent to find the others breakfasting off bread and boiled eggs, biscuits, butter and marmalade, with plastic mugs of coffee. They had brought a few loaves and some eggs from the mainland. A big bunch of bananas, apparently gathered by Chintoo, lay near.

'Your idea of helping the larder by catching some fish isn't going to work out,' Ginger told Biggles as he sat down. The place is absolutely crawling with crocodiles. I've seen plenty of the stinking brutes in my time, but never any as precocious as these. They nearly come out of the water after you.'

'That's probably because they're never hunted here,' answered Biggles, shaking his fingers as he dropped an egg too hot to hold, there being no such unnecessary luxuries as egg-cups. 'We may be able to teach 'em to keep their distance.'

'If we can't all I can say is this place is a dead loss as far as I'm concerned.'

'How about fishing from the dinghy?' suggested Bertie.

‘Not on your life,’ declared Biggles emphatically. ‘A croc might take a bite at it, in which case we should be deflated in every sense of the word. If we run into a party of Salones we may be able to buy one of their *kabangs*, as I remember they call their boats. Failing that we might try fishing from the rocks. I’m relying on the rifle to get us some fresh food, a wild pig or a deer. Maybe Chintoo will have some ideas about that. I don’t know what sort of shot he is. I shall have to go into that before I trust him with a gun.’

At this point of the conversation everyone was brought to his feet by a tremendous bellowing at the rocky end of the beach. Rushing out they were just in time to see a small herd of perhaps half a dozen buffalo disappearing into the jungle, leaving one of their number behind. At first it was not easy to make out what was happening, except that for some reason this one was not able to follow the others. It was standing in about two feet of water, straining forward, neck outstretched, with a leg sticking out behind it at an unnatural angle. In spite of its desperate efforts to get back to dry land, it was being dragged backwards, slowly but surely, into deeper water. In its pain and terror it was making a fearful noise.

‘Either a croc or a shark has got it by the foot,’ snapped Biggles, grasping the situation, as did everyone at the same moment. He dashed into the tent and came out with the rifle. Loading as he ran he sprinted towards the scene of the drama. Everyone, including Chintoo, *parang* in hand, followed.

By the time they had reached the spot, the buffalo, still bellowing like a mad creature and foaming at the mouth, had lost more ground. It was now in water to above the knees, and throwing itself about looked likely to fall at any second. It was not easy to see how this was to be prevented, for its assailant was out of sight under the water, and the terrified animal, with its long, backward-sweeping horns, looked as dangerous to approach as the beast holding it. This, in its efforts to secure its prey, now came to the surface, lashing the water into clouds of spray with its tail. It was a crocodile, and a monster.

Biggles began shooting at it, aiming at any part that appeared above water, for in the turmoil it was not possible to pick a spot likely to prove fatal. He had to fire five shots before one took effect. This was at the crocodile’s head, as for a moment it was lifted clear of the water by the now frantic animal. The crocodile must have released its hold, for it disappeared in a swirl of blood-stained water. The buffalo, finding itself free, lunged forward so quickly that Biggles only just escaped being knocked down. The poor brute, its leg mangled and bleeding, plunged into the jungle where it disappeared from sight with a great crashing of bushes.

Biggles, who had raised his rifle as if to shoot it, lowered it.

‘Much meat, Tuan,’ said Chintoo, reprovingly.

‘Yes,’ answered Biggles. ‘I should have shot it.’

‘Why didn’t you?’ inquired Ginger, in a disappointed voice. ‘We could have had rump steak for dinner. It’ll probably die, anyway. Every leech for

miles will follow that blood trail.'

Biggles smiled sheepishly. 'I had every intention of shooting it. But it suddenly struck me as sheer hypocrisy to save the life of that wretched animal only to kill it and eat it ourselves. After all, if that was to be its fate, the croc had more right to it than we had, being first on the scene.'

Put in Bertie, morosely: 'You go on like that and you'll have me bursting into tears.'

'Ah well. Such is nature in the raw. Everything always eating something. I must admit these crocs are a curse. If that one could drag a buffalo backwards into the sea imagine what a hope we'd have if one got hold of one of us.'

'If I hadn't seen it happen I wouldn't have believed that a croc could pull down a beast the size and weight of that buffalo,' asserted Ginger.

'I can't say I was particularly surprised,' returned Biggles. 'It's hard to imagine a crocodile pulling into a river a rhinoceros weighing two or three tons. Yet Mr. F. C. Selous, the famous big game hunter, in his book *African Nature Notes*, has a marvellous sequence of photographs showing that actually happening, from the moment the rhino was seized as it was drinking, to the time it was disappearing in deep water. But that's enough about crocs. I had reckoned to be on the move by now. We have work to do. This isn't a picnic.'

'I'm just beginning to realize it,' replied Bertie, grimly.

Somewhat subdued by what they had witnessed, they walked back to camp. Only Chintoo, who, like many orientals, apparently had little regard for animals, seemed disappointed with the outcome of the affair. To him, evidently, the buffalo was 600-lbs. weight of good food thrown away.

No more time was lost. The *Gadfly* was taken down to the sea, the rifle having been put on board in case the opportunity arose to bag a pig or a deer. Chintoo was left in charge of the camp, for on this occasion the intention was to do no more than make a slow tour of the island on which they stood. Unless it became necessary, the aircraft would not even be taken off the water; for as Biggles had pointed out, if the *Vagabond* had in fact gone ashore on one of the islands, what remained of it would be on the coast, in or out of the water. A vessel that size could hardly have been blown by wind, or carried by a big sea, into the interior of any island; wherefore there was no point in searching anywhere except along the shore. Naturally, the one they were on came first in order of inspection.

By taxiing, using the aircraft as a boat, they would be able to travel slowly, using binoculars, even stopping to examine closely anything that seemed worth while. This was the general plan, although for obvious reasons it would only be practicable in really calm weather. The sea now being dead calm, it was clearly advisable to make the most of it.

It did not take those on board long to realize the immensity of the task confronting them. What had seemed a fairly simple procedure when the enterprise was being discussed, was anything but that when it came to putting

it into effect. It was not so much any particular difficulty, as far as could be seen at present, but the time it was likely to take.

Biggles controlled the craft while Bertie with binoculars made a close study of the foreshore and for as far back as it was possible to see, particularly when the ground was flat. Ginger confined his attention to the sea bed, which could be seen plainly through the crystal-clear water, except on the few places where it ran deep. These were of no importance, because had the *Vagabond* gone down in deep water it would not have been possible for the old Salone to get the sovereigns that had started the quest.

By the time the island had been more than half circumnavigated, the only object of interest that had been seen was a shark that seemed determined to follow them. While things were as they were it could do no harm. Nothing had been seen of any Salones, who might have been there. Some wild pig were seen foraging on a little beach, but they had scampered away before Biggles could fetch the rifle. After that he kept it beside him but did not get another chance. They had a snack lunch.

When they came to the mangrove belt, which swung round the end of the island to within sight of the camp, the task became much more difficult. It was realized that in a high wind a ship might well be blown into the trees to a distance beyond their range of vision. The dim light within the swamp made it difficult to see anything clearly. Yet Biggles dare not take the aircraft too close to the trees for fear of damaging a wing or the tail unit. To make matters still worse, here the water was so black and muddy that it was impossible to see an inch below the surface.

Biggles did a certain amount of manoeuvring, juggling with the engines, but this was tricky work and did little good. As he pointed out, however, there was this about it. The mangroves occurred chiefly on the leeward side of the islands, whereas a ship sailing between the main ports of the Indian Ocean, as the *Vagabond* would be, would pass on the seaward side of the islands. The chances were, therefore, that the *Vagabond*, if anything was left of her, would be on the outer side; that is, away from the mangroves. It seemed a reasonable assumption.

While discussing this, Biggles had allowed the *Gadfly* to come to a stop, primarily to allow Bertie to use the glasses with the maximum effect.

‘That seems to be about all we can do,’ said Biggles presently. ‘We can strike Hog Island off our list. I wasn’t very hopeful of it because it’s the first place Macdonald would make for after finding the sovereigns. Let’s get home.’ He eased open the throttle.

The *Gadfly*, which was lying side on to the mangroves, did not move.

He gave the engines a little more power, gently, to avoid a jerk and possible collision with a tree.

The aircraft pitched a little but still did not move.

‘What goes on?’ inquired Ginger.

‘Either we’re stuck on a root or we’re aground,’ answered Biggles,

glancing at the near-by beach. 'The tide's on the ebb. I must have been crazy to stop here. That's the trouble of not knowing the depth of the water.'

'We must have stopped right over a mud bank.'

'Evidently. If we're really stuck, with the tide running out, we look like being here for some time; six hours at least, till the next high water.' As he finished speaking Biggles gave the engines an even sharper burst of throttle. The airscrews flashed. The machine dipped its nose a little. That was all. He retarded the throttle.

'No use,' he muttered. 'No great harm done, but we've had it for the time being. I deserve to be kicked from here to the camp. I wonder, can we rock her off? Go aft and throw your weight, both of you, from side to side when I open up. Buck up. Every minute counts.'

The method was tried several times without success. Biggles tried using one engine only, but that only tended to cause the aircraft to turn on its longitudinal axis, so that had it come unstuck suddenly, either the nose or the tail unit would have struck a tree or the sprawling roots.

'Here comes Chin-Chin to see what the fuss is about,' observed Bertie, seeing the Malay hurrying along the beach towards them.

Biggles, concerned only with their plight, ignored the remark. There's no point in wasting petrol,' he said, switching off. 'We shall have to wait till there's more water under us; that's all there is to it.'

The sudden cessation of engine noise after it had persisted for so long had an effect that can best be described as uncanny. The retreating water gurgled between the interminable roots. In the sultry heat the very atmosphere seemed to sweat. Chintoo came to as near as he could get along the beach and shouted to be told what was wrong.

Ginger answered briefly. 'We're aground. We shall have to wait for high water.'

Chintoo threw up his hands and walked back along the beach.

'That's all it means to him,' growled Ginger.

'I don't see what he can do about it,' said Biggles. 'Living where he does, he must have seen this sort of thing happen to small boats hundreds of times.'

Ginger, looking down at the turgid water lapping their hull, saw two knobs appear. He recognized them for the eyes of a crocodile. They were joined by two more. Very soon there were a dozen or more pairs near the aircraft. 'Did you ever see so many crocodiles in your life?' he said. 'The place is lousy with the brutes. I suppose they're not likely to interfere with the machine?' he added anxiously.

'I wouldn't think so; why should they?' answered Biggles.

'They can't have seen an aircraft before. They might take us for a new line in birds and try their teeth on our keel. After what they did to that buffalo—'

'Forget it,' returned Biggles, shortly. But his expression changed when the machine was given a sharp nudge from below.

'Who did that?'

'Not me.'

The head of a crocodile floated up alongside the hull.

'I don't know that I like this,' put in Bertie, deadly serious for once. He fixed his eyeglass more tightly and stared down at the scaly monsters crowding near them.

There was another nudge, followed by a scraping sound as if a hard object was being dragged under the hull.

'Here, I say, this isn't funny,' cried Bertie. These devils mean mischief.'

'I'll soon put an end to that sort of caper,' asserted Biggles cogently.

'Ginger, pass me the rifle.' He was standing in the cockpit, having opened the cover.

Ginger passed the weapon. Biggles loaded it with a cartridge from his pocket. At a range of not much more than a yard careful aim was unnecessary. He pointed the muzzle between the eyes looking up at him and squeezed the trigger.

The result of the report was in the nature of an earthquake. Mud and water churned. Great gaseous bubbles floated up to burst on the surface and fill the humid air with an appalling smell. The aircraft rocked, slime licking its sides, as the stricken crocodile spun over and over lashing its tail. This may have lasted for half a minute, although to Ginger, severely shaken, it seemed longer. Then the reptile's struggles subsided and it floated belly up.

'I wouldn't try any more of that, old boy,' called Bertie earnestly.

'Don't worry, I shan't,' returned Biggles grimly. He was looking anything but happy.

Ginger's voice rose high. He pointed. 'Ye gods! Look at Chintoo! What's he doing? He must be out of his mind.'

All eyes switched to the Malay, who, unnoticed in the turmoil, had returned. With a rope—the spare mooring line—over a shoulder he was hurrying towards them over the mangrove roots with the agility of a monkey. He reached the stilt-like legs of the tree nearest to the bows of the aircraft and stopped.

'Go back, you fool,' yelled Biggles. 'The water's full of crocodiles.'

'Catch, Tuan,' called Chintoo, calmly, and the rope, uncoiling, swung through the air. Biggles caught it. By now he had of course realized the intention. The question was where to fasten the line; where it would not foul the airscrews. The obvious place was the mooring ring, and this, although it involved risks, is what he used. Dropping back into his seat, he started the engines to give the Malay all the help possible.

Chintoo, seeing the line made fast, clambered back along the roots until he had a direct pull forwards. He stretched the rope taut. 'Now, Tuan,' he screamed, and with the rope over a shoulder threw his weight on it.

Biggles opened up, and in a moment, after a sticky start, the *Gadfly* floated free. Biggles had to do some quick work with the controls, cutting one engine to swing away from the trees. Then it was all over. Discussing the business

afterwards, it was thought that the crocodile, by stirring up the mud in its death struggles, had simplified matters.

Chintoo, paying out rope as he went, made his way to the point where the mangroves ended and the beach began.

‘Jolly good show,’ cried Bertie. ‘The old boy deserves a gold medal for thinking of it and knowing how to do it.’

‘If we find those sovereigns I’ll see he gets one,’ declared Biggles, as he taxied on towards the beach. ‘These infernal crocodiles are going to be a nuisance. They’ve had things their own way for too long. They’re not afraid of men, that’s the trouble.’

‘By gosh! They’ve got me afraid of *them*,’ confessed Ginger frankly.

When the *Gadfly* had lowered its wheels and run up to its stand by the tent—scattering a troop of crab-hunting monkeys on the way—Chintoo was at his fire bending over a pot from which arose an appetizing aroma. Biggles thanked him for what he had done and congratulated him on his quick wits.

All the Malay had to say was ‘*Utong baik*,’ meaning, what good luck.

‘What are you cooking?’ Biggles asked him.

‘Plandok, Tuan. I call. He come.’

‘What’s plandok?’ asked Bertie.

‘A deer!’

Bertie looked incredulous.

‘It’s sometimes called the Mouse Deer. It’s the smallest deer in the world, less than a foot long. No horns. It’s cooked whole, like a chicken,’ explained Biggles.

‘What did he mean by saying he called it?’

‘The Malays have a trick of imitating its call by tapping on a leaf. That brings it close. I’m told it makes good eating.’

‘This chap’s a magician,’ declared Bertie. ‘I’m beginning to wonder what we’d have done without him.’

CHAPTER 5

AN UNPLEASANT VISITOR

Ten days later the position was unchanged, except that all the islands within easy reach of the camp had been examined without any sign of the wreck of the *Vagabond*. The bare bones of an old hulk were found, but these were the remains of an iron ship, so it could not be *Vagabond*, which was a wooden vessel. It was thought this particular wreck went back to pre-war days. They might expect to find others, of the war period, when during the battle for Singapore many ships had been lost.

Finding they were getting low in petrol and oil, and not daring yet to rely on the dumps Captain Macdonald had promised, in case he had not had time to attend to them, Biggles had flown to Penang to fill up. He also brought back with him some fresh food, bread, fruit and vegetables. This would enable them to carry on for the time being.

Pot-hunting with the gun and rifle had produced some meat, as a change from canned food. Bertie had shot a wild pig, but apart from getting tired of pork, Biggles knew from experience that such a restricted diet as they were on would eventually lead to stomach troubles. The only fruit Chintoo had been able to find were bananas, and these were not yet properly ripe. Coconut became monotonous.

Some fish had been caught, when the aircraft was well clear of the coast, by dangling overboard lines baited with pieces of fat, but nothing of any size had been caught. Larger ones had been hooked, but before they could be brought to hand they were invariably attacked by larger fish or sharks which mustered round the stationary aircraft as if they knew what was going on. One fish, species unknown, which must have weighed all of forty pounds, was bitten off all except the head just as Ginger was hauling it aboard. He might well have lost a hand at the same time. The trouble about this sort of fishing was, when a fish too large to be landed was hooked, the line was broken and the tackle lost.

‘This is the difference between facts and what you read in books,’ remarked Biggles, on such an occasion. ‘This living on a desert island isn’t all it’s cracked up to be.’

Nothing had been seen of any natives. For some reason they had evidently left the district. Biggles had hoped to find them on Cochran Island, where Captain Macdonald had seen them, in order to question them through Chintoo. There were signs of their stay, but the people and their boats had departed.

The weather remained perfect, but they were all beginning to realize the enormity of the task they had undertaken. However, there was no talk of abandoning it.

Chintoo continued to make himself useful. During one of their excursions, when he had as usual remained in camp, he had built at low tide a sort of bamboo fence, or stockade, when the tide was out. This was the shape of a horseshoe with extended legs, the idea being to form a small, crocodile-proof enclosure. Even when the tide was right up it did not surround the ends of the fence. The water was too shallow for swimming, but it did at least enable them to have a bath.

Walking down early one morning for a dip, Ginger's attention was drawn to a gathering of monkeys farther along the beach. They were making a good deal of noise and were apparently excited by something that had been washed up. He walked along to see what it was. When the monkeys had scampered off at his approach, he saw it was a dead crocodile. It had been shot, so it was either the one that had attacked the buffalo or the beast Biggles had killed from the aircraft. It was an enormous, hideous-looking brute, and after seeing it Ginger was never entirely happy inside the stockade, although the usual method of using the improvised bath was for one to watch while the others took a dip. No one felt inclined to take chances.

'We've done about all we can do from here,' said Biggles one morning as they sat outside the tent having breakfast. 'We'll pack up and move on. I think our best plan would be to strike camp and move along to Chang Island, the nearest of those where Mac said he would dump our stuff. It should be there by now, or be along shortly. If there's a comfortable place to make a camp we'll stay there and work the islands around as we've done here.'

The others agreed as a matter of course, but without enthusiasm. The truth of the matter was, spirits had been somewhat damped, not only by failure but by the improbability of success.

'Okay,' said Biggles, getting up. 'Let's get on with it.'

'Just a minute; what's this coming?' observed Ginger, who was looking out to sea.

Heading towards the island was a small, smart, white-painted launch or power boat. A little flag, as yet unrecognizable, fluttered from the bow.

'I can't imagine who it can be, but it's certainly coming here,' said Biggles.

They walked slowly down the beach to meet the visitor.

The cutter, with a man standing in the bows to take soundings, came as near as it dare to the beach. The throb of the engine ceased. A dinghy which it carried on deck was put over the side. Into it stepped the man who was to handle it and another carrying a rifle. These were followed by a man in a white uniform with a peaked cap, from all the signs a person of some importance. He was rowed ashore.

All this was watched with the greatest interest by the airmen standing on the sand.

'Who do you suppose he is?' said Bertie quietly.

Biggles answered. 'I haven't a clue, but I fancy we shall soon know the

answer.'

The man being discussed advanced, followed closely by the one carrying the rifle. He was dark-skinned, short and rather stout, and from the truculent manner of his approach evidently had a high opinion of himself.

'Here comes trouble or I've never seen it,' murmured Biggles.

'Which of you is leader of this party?' inquired the visitor, curtly, in English.

'I am,' informed Biggles.

'You are Englishmen?'

'We are.'

'What are you doing here?'

'Is that any concern of yours?'

'It is.'

'In that case you might have the courtesy to tell us who you are and whom you represent.'

'I am Captain Yomas of the Coast Patrol, Burmese Customs Office. I heard you were here.'

'What of it? We didn't try to make a secret of it.'

'Have you permission to land here?'

'I have a permit to operate among the islands.'

At this the Burman looked a trifle taken aback. 'Where did you get it?'

'It was obtained for me at the Burmese Office in London.'

'For what purpose are you here?'

'Chiefly to take photographs.'

'You did not report to me for Customs examination.'

'I haven't been to Mergui, and in any case I didn't know it was necessary.'

Biggles remained calm and polite, but Ginger could see his expression hardening under this uncivil interrogation, the more so perhaps from the pompous manner in which it was being carried out. He recalled what Macdonald had said about some of the local officials.

'I demand to search your plane,' announced the Burman.

'Nobody is stopping you; but I don't think you'll find anything of interest; certainly no contraband.'

'I see you have a rifle.'

'One is necessary here, as apparently you have noticed. The crocodiles are many and dangerous.'

'What else have you?'

'Some cameras.'

'Has duty been paid on them?'

'No duty was payable. Authority to bring them and take pictures was incorporated in my permit. You may see it if you wish.'

The Burman ignored the offer. He pointed to Chintoo, standing in the background. 'What is that man doing here?'

'I hired him as an interpreter should I find one necessary. I don't speak

Malay.'

'Did you get permission for that, too?'

'It was not necessary. You know that as well as I do.'

'You cannot stay here,' said the official, abruptly.

'Who says so?'

'I do.'

'Aren't you taking a lot on yourself?'

'You will obey my orders.'

This was too much for Biggles. 'Now you listen to me, my fine fellow,' he said frostily. 'You came here deliberately to make trouble. I'm a peaceable man, but there's a limit to how much I'm prepared to take from you. I've been patient. I'm causing no inconvenience to you or anyone else. If you've any complaint you can make it to your head office. Now trot along before I get angry and kick your backside to teach you better manners.'

The official hesitated. 'We might be able to settle this little matter amicably,' he suggested, with a sly smile.

Biggles regarded him with cold disfavour. 'I've realized that all along; but if you came here hoping to get some money out of me you came to the wrong man. I've met your sort before. Now take yourself off or I won't be answerable for the consequences.'

Captain Yomas glared. The glare became a scowl. 'You will be sorry for this,' he threatened.

'Not so sorry as you will be if you're not off this island in five minutes,' promised Biggles grimly. He took a pace forward.

Yomas turned about, and followed by his man marched stiffly back to his boat.

'Pity that had to happen,' said Biggles quietly, as the launch moved off in the direction of the mainland. 'One has to be prepared to take a certain amount of sauce from a certain type of official in the East, but that puffed-up little swipec made it so obvious what he was up to that I could stand no more of it.'

'You really think he was after a bribe?' queried Bertie.

'What else? I know how the racket is played. For a couple of hundred Straits dollars he'd have been fawning on us.'

'Do you think he'll make trouble?'

'He'll try to, you can bet on that. The very way I deflated him in front of his man, causing him to lose face as they call it, will make him as venomous as a snake that's had its tail twisted. I don't like making enemies, but if there's one thing I won't stand for it's being rooked by that sort of bumptious little upstart who's got too big for his boots. It's time he was cut down to his proper size.'

'It might have been easier to give him some money,' suggested Ginger.

'Never do that. It gets you nowhere in the long run. Had I given that insolent little rascal what he came for, he'd soon have found an excuse to

come back for more. Besides, we should have put ourselves in his hands.'

'How so?'

'Had we refused him anything afterwards he could have accused us of bribing an official, and we couldn't have denied it.' Biggles turned to Chintoo who was squatting on the sand. 'Do you know that man?'

'Yes, Tuan.'

'Where does he come from?'

'Mergui. He travels about.'

'Looking for trouble, I imagine.'

'Yes, Tuan. Skipper Mac has much trouble because he will not pay.'

'Ha! That miserable little twister wouldn't get much change out of him.'

'I wonder how he knew we were here?' put in Ginger.

'Probably picked up the news at Victoria Point. We made no secret of where we were going. Chintoo would have to tell his wife.'

The Malay admitted this. He saw no reason why he shouldn't tell her. Of course, he didn't know the real object of the expedition.

Biggles agreed. 'Let's get on with packing up,' he said crisply. 'Now we have all the more reason to move. If Yomas comes back he'll find we've gone, and it should take him a little while to find out where.'

The work of breaking camp began. It did not take very long. Everything was stowed away in the machine, including of course the tent, although not the bamboo posts and pegs, as it was expected there would be an ample supply of these at their next base. By the time everything was ready for departure the coast patrol boat was a speck on the horizon.

Biggles took the aircraft down to the water. 'All aboard,' he called.

Ginger, by invitation, on this occasion took his place next to Biggles in the cockpit. The wheels were raised, and the *Gadfly*, cutting a white line of foam across the face of the placid sea, rose into the air. Ginger watched Hog Island fall away astern without regret. It was an attractive place to look at, but not a very comfortable one on which to live.

The journey to their immediate objective, Chang Island, was no great distance. The chart had shown it to be about fifty miles, a matter of a mere twenty minutes flying time. The intervening region was dotted with small islands, some of which had been visited, and while these made a charming picture from the air, such scenes had become too commonplace for appreciation. The only vessels seen were the coastguard launch in the far distance and a lonely junk apparently becalmed.

Ginger called attention to it. 'What do you suppose they're doing?'

'Pearling, probably.'

'It beats me that anyone dare dive for pearls in water where there are so many sharks.'

'If people didn't dive in waters where there are sharks there wouldn't be any pearls. It so happens that, generally speaking, pearl oysters are only found where the water is reasonably warm. The same with sharks of the dangerous

sorts. The divers have to take risks, but like other people in dangerous trades they must think it worth while. No doubt they become accustomed to them. Chintoo told me these Chinese traders buy more pearls from the Salones than they get by their own efforts. It seems to be a bit of a racket, the shrewd Chinaman getting his pearls cheap because the Salones don't know the real value of them. But that's their affair. We should be seeing the Salones soon unless for some reason they've moved to the extreme north end of the Archipelago. I thought we might see the *Alora*, but it doesn't appear to be about. That looks like Chang Island straight ahead. It should be. It's a bit longer than Hog Island but not so hilly.'

Ginger consulted the chart on his knees. 'That's it.'

Biggles retarded the throttle a little and began a long glide towards the objective. 'According to Mac there are three fair-sized beaches here and a few small ones,' he remarked. 'He said he'd make the dump on the largest. It's on the eastern side. That must be the one we can see from here.'

Nothing more was said. The *Gadfly* glided in, touched down, and on its wheels ran a little way up the silvery sand. Biggles switched off, and then sat looking at the area of sand that had been left smooth by the last tide.

He looked for so long that Ginger said: 'Anything wrong?'

'I don't know, but somebody has been here recently,' answered Biggles. 'Let's have a look.'

Everyone got out. Biggles advanced to a trampled area of what were obviously human footprints.

'Ah-ha!' exclaimed Bertie. 'Real Robinson Crusoe stuff— what. Where's man Friday? He should be about somewhere.'

The remark could have meant nothing to Chintoo. He examined the footprints. 'Chinese men come here,' he announced.

'You're sure they weren't Salones?'

'No, Tuan. Salones not wear shoes.'

'Well, I suppose the Chinese have as much right here as we have,' said Biggles. 'They're not here now. They may have been the crew of that junk we saw. I only hope they didn't spot Mac's cache and loot it. Let's see if it's here.'

They all walked on to the line of debris, seaweed, broken coral and driftwood, knowing the stores would not be buried below that mark.

The beach as a whole was in many respects like the one they had left, except that it curved a little more and was protected at both ends by boulders and outcrops of rock that reached into the sea. There were some mangroves, but as they were beyond the rocks, there seemed less to fear from the crocodiles that used them as a nesting ground.

The search began. It lasted for some time, for it was necessary to cover the full length of the beach as far back as the jungle of bamboos, palms, tree-ferns and flowering shrubs, that crowded down until they were stopped by the sand. At one end of the beach, near the rocks, there was a little heap of crab and

limpet shells. Behind it a semblance of a track meandered back into the rising ground.

‘Someone, or something, appears to have been here,’ observed Ginger.

‘Monkeys. Or it may have been the Chinese looking for fresh water,’ surmised Biggles. ‘The track could have been made by game, pig or buffalo, for instance, coming down to the beach as the only piece of open ground.’

The search yielded nothing to suggest that Captain Macdonald had fulfilled his promise. There were no marks of disturbed ground to indicate something had been buried.

‘The *Alora* can’t have reached here yet,’ decided Biggles at last. ‘All the same, we’d better have a look at the other beaches in case this isn’t the right one. It should be, but we can’t be absolutely certain. We shall have to look for fresh water, anyway, as there doesn’t seem to be any here. Let’s get on with it.’

CHAPTER 6

GINGER HAS A FRIGHT

It would have been an arduous task to walk completely round the coast even if this were possible, and as it was by no means sure, it was resolved to put the aircraft back on the water and taxi round.

The trip revealed two other beaches of fair size and several smaller ones, too small to be of any account. The large ones were explored without success, although on one an untidy mess showed that a party of Salones had been there, although not recently. A trickle of water running down from the higher ground may have been the reason.

The stench from a heap of rotting fish refuse was so awful that they did not linger, but made their way back to the first beach.

‘Mac should be along very soon,’ declared Biggles confidently. ‘He won’t let us down. We can manage for a few days, so we might as well make camp and wait for him. If we run short of food before he comes we can always slip across to the mainland and buy some, although I’d rather not do that if it can be avoided, because should we run into that officious little Customs man he’d do his best to make things difficult for us.’ Biggles lit a cigarette.

‘There’s one thing that puzzles me about this place,’ he went on. ‘Chintoo says some Chinese have been here and I take his word for it. He should know. Why did they land here? What were they after? If, as Chintoo tells us, they buy pearls from the Salones, why didn’t they go to the beach they used, particularly as there’s water there? But never mind about that now. Let’s get the tent up and have some lunch. Then, before we unload everything, we’d better have a look round to see if there’s fresh water handy. It’s the one thing we can’t do without, and we don’t want to have to keep going to that stinking beach the Salones used.’

‘I’ve been thinking about that—and other things,’ said Ginger, seriously.

‘Good. What other things?’

‘That heap of shells we saw higher up the beach. You said you thought they were the work of monkeys.’

‘Well?’

‘I don’t agree.’

‘Why not?’

‘I’ve seen plenty of places where monkeys have been feeding and always the shells were scattered all over the place. Those here were thrown in a heap, more or less. Doesn’t that suggest they were gathered off the rocks by a man, one man, who then sat down and ate them, rather than by a gang of monkeys?’

Biggles stroked his chin. ‘Yes. You could be right,’ he agreed. ‘That didn’t strike me. Does it matter?’

‘It might.’

‘Tell me how. What’s on your mind?’

‘Do you remember what Mac told us, or rather, what the Salones he spoke to told him? They had chucked out one of their old men because he had become so foul-tempered that he was a nuisance. This, it was supposed, was the dead man Mac found, the chap with the sovereigns round his neck. We saw on the next beach that the main party of Salones had been here.’

‘From the signs that was some time ago.’

‘No matter. What I’m getting at is, it’s reasonable to suppose the old outcast would hang about near the main party. When they were on the next beach he came here.’

‘I see what you mean,’ said Biggles slowly.

‘He may have found the sovereigns—well, if not here, on another island not far away. At all events, it seems to me that we’re nearer the place where he found the sovereigns than we were on Hog Island.’

‘That was well thought out. We’ll keep it in mind.’

‘I haven’t finished yet. If I’m right in thinking the old man stayed here—or any man for that matter—it means there must be fresh water near at hand. The old man wouldn’t dare to go along to the next beach for fear of being kicked in the pants by his own people.’

‘True enough.’

‘If there’s water on the slope behind us, a spring, or a pool, it would account for the track we saw.’

Biggles smiled. ‘Quite right. You certainly have been keeping your brain running at full revs.’

‘I was going to suggest that while you’re fixing the tent, I might put my theory to the test. We need water.’

‘Fair enough,’ agreed Biggles. ‘But don’t go far. You might take the gun in case you meet a plandok or a pig. We could do with some fresh meat to save our canned stuff.’

‘Right. I’ll do that,’ said Ginger. He fetched the gun, put some cartridges in his pocket, and slinging two water-bottles over his shoulder walked off in the direction of the track.

Reaching the heap of shells that lay near the narrow opening into the jungle, he stopped to have a second look at them, more from curiosity than in any expectation of seeing anything of interest. Before moving on he stirred them with his foot. A small bright yellow object, half buried in sand, caught his eye. He stooped and picked it up. Holding it between a finger and thumb, he stared at it, fascinated. He dropped it into the palm of his hand and stared again. There could be no mistake. It was a golden sovereign. He looked at the date. 1938. His brain raced. So this was where the old man had sat and strung his sovereigns! He looked for more, but found none.

Naturally, his first impulse was to rush back to the others and show them his find, particularly as it bore out his theory beyond all possible doubt. On

second thoughts, seeing they were busy with the tent, he put the coin in his pocket and went on. There was no hurry. It could wait. Meanwhile it would be pleasant to anticipate their expressions when he produced what could with justification be regarded as a clue of capital importance.

In the jungle the light was dim and the heat sultry. The path, such as it was, zigzagged up the hill; always narrow, it was sometimes necessary to push aside ingrowing palm fronds and the like. The ground underfoot was soft, often slush, which he took to be a sign of water not far above. There were marks, but a blanket of rotting leaves made it impossible to guess what had made them. They were all intermingled. So thick was the undergrowth that he could only see a little way on either side. If there were any birds he neither saw nor heard them. A clammy, uncanny silence reigned. The only living things seemed to be insects, and there were plenty of those, including some large, beautifully marked and coloured moths, which aroused his admiration.

He was not surprised when he came to a little pool fed by a trickle from the higher ground. It was a veritable miniature fairyland. The water was crystal clear, although there was not much of it, the whole thing being no larger than a moderate-sized bath. One side rose sheer for about a yard, a tiny cliff of emerald green moss from which sprang maidenhair and other delicate ferns. The side from which he approached was smooth mud, where the ground had apparently been worn down by creatures coming to drink. What these creatures were he had no idea; as they could only be small, or so he supposed, he didn't give the matter a moment's thought.

He tasted the water, and finding it sweet had a good drink. He then filled the two water-bottles, lingered a minute or two admiring the spot, and then, well satisfied with the success of his errand, for the pool was within easy reach of the proposed camp, continued on along the track to ascertain how far it went or to what else it might lead.

He did not go far. The path became steeper, slippery, and much overgrown, so deciding the project was not worth pursuing, he gave it up and turned back.

He was passing the pool when he saw something that brought him to a halt. So unprepared was he, and such was the shock it gave him, that he faltered, unable to make up his mind whether to go forward or back. The little fairy dell had on the instant become something very different.

What his eyes remained fixed on was a huge paw mark in the mud; such a footprint as could only have been made by a great cat. He knew of only one which occurred in that part of the world. Tiger. The alarming part of the thing was it had only just been made; in fact, it could only have been made during the few minutes he had been away. The edges were still sharp, although as the water which had been squeezed out returned they were beginning to crumble.

He lowered the gun to a position more ready for use, even though, as he was well aware, it would not be much use against a tiger. He slipped off the safety catch and, without moving his feet, peered into the tangle of undergrowth that crowded around him almost to the lip of the pool. Had the

tiger been stalking him or had it merely been along for a drink? He didn't know. A guess either way could have been right.

He could see nothing. He listened. Not a sound. An uncomfortable feeling crept over him that he was being watched by unseen eyes. The hair on the nape of his neck began to tickle, his hands to tremble slightly and his heart to beat faster. Moistening his lips, which had gone dry, with nerves tense he began to walk slowly, very slowly, towards the beach. The temptation to run was hard to resist, but he realized the danger of giving way to panic.

With his eyes on the tangle of shrubs on either side, not looking where he was putting his feet, he nearly stepped into the middle of a coiled cobra. The creature merely raised its head a trifle, hissing like a soda-water siphon as it extended its hood. It was this that drew his attention to it. Unable to stop he jumped over it. This was the last straw and he finished at a run.

He reached the beach with a gasp of relief and hastened to join the others, who were still busy setting up camp.

Biggles, happening to glance at him, stopped what he was doing. 'What's the matter with you?' he inquired.

'What gives you the idea that anything's the matter?'

'Your face is the colour of a lump of dough.'

'So would yours be had you been in my position a few minutes ago. Here, take this gun off me. Careful, it's still loaded.' Ginger threw down the water-bottles. 'It may interest you to know we've a tiger for company.'

'Did you see it?'

'No.'

Then how can you be sure?'

'I saw his pug mark at a water-hole.'

Biggles frowned. 'What a nuisance. Still, it's unlikely that he'll be a man-eater. He won't interfere with us if we don't get in his way. Why be so scared?'

'It's all very well for you to talk like that standing here,' retorted Ginger. 'At one time the beast must have been within yards of me. I found a water-hole and filled the bottles. There wasn't a mark there then. I went on a few yards. I wasn't away more than five minutes. When I came back there was a whacking great footprint in the mud. If you think that's funny take a stroll up the track and give yourself a good laugh.'

'Okay-okay. You didn't actually see him?'

'No. And I couldn't hear a sound. But I'm sure the devil was watching me. I could feel it in my bones. If you decide to have a look I can tell you that just for full measure there's a cobra taking a nap in the middle of the path.'

Chintoo had come close with the others to listen. Biggles turned to him. 'Could there be a tiger here?'

'Yes, Tuan. He like swim. Come to island. No like, no stay. When come to one he like, plenty pig, he stay.'

Bertie chipped in. 'I say, look here, old boy. I'm nothing for sharing the

place with a bally tiger. Monkeys, yes. Jolly little fellers. But tigers, oh no. I like my tigers behind bars. What's wrong with waffling along to another island? There are umpteen to choose from—if you see what I mean.'

'If we did that we'd miss Mac when he comes with the stores,' Biggles pointed out. 'If we weren't here he'd make the dump as arranged, so we'd still have to come back. I don't feel like changing our plan on account of a tiger. There might be one anywhere, if it comes to that. We'll stay until we see how this one behaves. We shall have to search the coast anyway, for the *Vagabond*. So far all we've done is skip round the beaches. Let's carry on.'

'Hold hard a minute,' cried Ginger. 'I've just remembered something. I was right about that old Salone having been here. He left that pile of shells.'

'How do you know?'

'Look what I found under 'em!' Ginger took the sovereign from his pocket and spun it through the air.

Biggles caught it. 'Well, I'll go hopping—'

'Take a look at the date.'

Biggles did so. '1938,' he breathed.

'I wouldn't mind betting this is where the old devil sat and strung the coins together,' continued Ginger. 'When you come to think about it, with perhaps only an old nail and a lump of rock to work with, that would take some time. He may not have done all the coins at one go; but he certainly had some loose ones when he was here because he dropped one. I think it follows that the place where he found them can't be far from here.'

'Just a minute,' said Biggles. 'This needs thinking about. When I was talking to Mac he said the Salones mostly stay on the beaches. They have to, because that's where they get their food. They live almost entirely on the shell-fish they find on the rocks. We've seen proof of that. They stay in one place only for as long as the supply of crabs and limpets holds out; then they move on. That's the trouble. They're always on the move. They wander from island to island in their home-made boats—*kabangs*. This piece of gold is interesting, I must admit, but we still don't know where it came from.'

'It looks to me as if the old man was still making his necklace when he was here, which suggests he found the coins not far away,' argued Ginger.

'Mac came on the canoe near Hog Island,' reminded Bertie. 'That's a long way from here.'

Biggles answered. 'Fifty miles. That isn't far. Of course, we don't know how long the old man had been dead, but in these sharp currents the canoe could have drifted that distance in two or three days.'

'Don't forget Mac searched the nearest islands,' Ginger pointed out.

'I wouldn't rely too much on that,' came back Biggles. 'It couldn't have been much of a search. The *Alora* is a fair size. He wouldn't dare risk his ship by taking her in very close unless he knew he had plenty of water under him. From a distance it wouldn't be easy to spot the wreck of the *Vagabond*. He told me that when he picks up cargo from one of the larger islands, mostly

timber or mangrove bark, he has to manhandle it aboard in a small boat, either one of his own, or, if there are Salones there, in one of their *kabangs*. I imagine that's how he'll have to land our stores here.'

'Well, there it is,' concluded Ginger. 'You work it out. I've given you something to start on. All I ask is, don't expect me to go alone to fetch a bucket of water from that pool. Now I could do with a mug of tea and a bite of something to eat. Come on, Chintoo. Get cracking.'

'Yes, Tuan. All ready.'

CHAPTER 7

MORE PROBLEMS

The night having passed without incident, apart from the usual trouble with fire ants, dawn found the party eating breakfast outside the tent. There had been hopes that the *Alora* would be in sight heading for the island, but in this they were disappointed. There was not a vessel, large or small, in view.

‘I’ve been trying to work out something from the sovereign you found, Ginger,’ said Biggles, as he spread canned butter and marmalade on another biscuit. ‘I feel it should help us, but exactly how isn’t easy to work out. The only conclusion I’ve arrived at is this. What we’ve got to look for is not where a big party of Salones has stayed, but a little heap of shells on a beach where the old man sat alone. If we’re right in thinking—and I don’t see how it can be otherwise—that it was near such a place that he found the wreckage of the *Vagabond*, it should narrow our search considerably. Put it like this. All we need do is look over as many beaches as we can find. Where there are no shells we needn’t waste any time; but if we find a small heap of empty shells, such as one man alone would make, then we go over the place thoroughly. In that way we should cover the ground a lot faster, although I must admit it’s taking a chance of missing what we’re looking for. But we can’t stay here indefinitely.’

‘Don’t forget the old boy had a canoe,’ reminded Bertie. ‘He had to have one to move from island to island. Actually, as we know, he ended his life in it.’

‘What of it?’

‘I was thinking; when he came ashore he must have pulled his boat up high and dry. He could hardly do that without leaving a mark in the sand. The tide would wash it out low down, of course, but to make sure his boat was safe, surely he’d pull it up beyond the high-water mark. Signs of that would remain for some time. It would be something else to look for.’

‘That’s sound reasoning,’ conceded Biggles. ‘We’ll look for such marks, but I’m not sure you’re right. He might anchor his boat to a stone, leaving it afloat.’

‘Is there any reason why he should?’

‘Possibly. I’m thinking of the weight of these Salone *kabangs*. It might be beyond the strength of one man, an old man at that, to haul one up a sloping sandy beach. They must be heavy. Mac told me they consist simply of a hollowed-out tree trunk with a few inches of extra freeboard tacked along the sides to prevent them from swamping in a seaway. However, it’s worth remembering.’

Bertie sighed. ‘It’s uncanny how my brain waves always seem to run up against a snag,’ he said sadly.

Ginger spoke in a most unusual voice. 'Don't look round, anybody. Just keep talking. We're being watched.'

Biggles stared. 'Watched! By whom?'

'I saw a face looking at us from the jungle. I think it was a Chinaman. I happened to be watching the bank for my tiger. It's gone now, but I'll keep my eyes on the spot in case he has another dekho at us. Don't move.'

'This is getting ridiculous,' declared Biggles. 'First a tiger. Now a Chinaman. Are you sure you aren't beginning to see things that aren't there?'

'I've seen enough faces in my time to be able to recognize one when I see it,' answered Ginger, with unsmiling sarcasm. 'I tell you I saw a face. I saw a fern frond move. It was the only one. That's why, thinking of a tiger, it caught my eye. Then, against the shadow behind, a face appeared. It watched us for a few seconds and then disappeared. If you still don't believe me pass me the gun and I'll plaster the spot with a load of slugs. You'll see what happens.'

'We're not starting anything like that,' replied Biggles shortly. 'Okay. So you saw a face. Tell me if you see it again.'

The meal continued, but with less animation. Ginger, who sat facing the fringe of the jungle, watched it, but by the time they had finished the face had not reappeared. He admitted frankly that he was beginning to wonder if he had really seen one, or had been tricked by a play of light and shade in the early morning sun.

'Well, we can't sit here all day,' said Biggles, getting up purposefully. 'If some joker is playing I'll take a hand. Where exactly did you think you saw the face, Ginger?'

'About five feet up, by that tree fern next to the bush with the red flowers.'

Biggles strode to the spot, followed in a less determined manner by the others. He parted the fronds in several places to peer into the dim undergrowth.

'Can't see anyone,' he said, as the others caught up with him. 'One wouldn't expect to; the stuff's so thick that one might overlook an elephant, and the ground's in too much of a mess to show tracks. Let's forget it and get on with the job.'

They returned to the tent, where Chintoo informed them he would need a bucket of water for cooking, chiefly for boiling the rice.

Said Biggles: 'We can't very well tell him to go and fetch it himself, knowing there may be a tiger about. I'll go myself. I'll take the rifle—just in case.'

'I'll go with you to show you the well,' offered Ginger. 'I know where it is.'

'Jack and Jill went up the hill...' chanted Bertie. 'This fetching water every day with tigers on the prowl is going to be great fun. I'll bring up the rear with the gun. That, Ginger dear boy, will leave your hands free to carry a brace of buckets.'

Chintoo, saying nothing, watched the proceedings with an expression that

clearly meant he saw no humour in the situation.

Biggles loaded the rifle. Ginger picked up two canvas buckets. Bertie slipped cartridges into the double-barrelled twelve-bore, and in that order they set off.

Before they had taken a dozen paces they were brought to an abrupt halt when, from somewhere on the jungle-clad slope above them, and no great distance away, there came a shrill scream.

‘What the devil!’ exclaimed Biggles, staring.

‘Monkey,’ said Bertie. ‘Silly little ass fell off his perch.’

‘That was no monkey. That was a man’s voice.’

‘Probably the chap I saw,’ guessed Ginger.

‘What has he got to holler about?’

‘Met my tiger, maybe.’

‘Quit fooling,’ snapped Biggles. That sounded to me like a cry for help. We’d better have a look. He should be on the path. No one but a lunatic would try to force his way through the undergrowth. Don’t make a noise.’

They set off up the path at a brisk pace, Biggles leading, rifle held ready for instant use. The humid atmosphere was stifling and sweat poured down their faces, but Biggles did not stop until they reached the pool. Then, after a quick glance around, he said in a tense voice: ‘Sorry, Ginger. You were right about a tiger. There’s another pug mark; a new one, close to the old one. It could only have been made by a big fellow. Still, not to worry. With plenty of monkeys and wild pig available, he can’t be hungry, so he’s not likely to interfere with us.’

‘I like the way you talk about tigers as if they were house cats,’ protested Bertie. ‘They give me the willies.’

Ginger filled the buckets. ‘Now what?’ he inquired, somewhat anxiously.

Biggles was looking up the continuation of the narrow track. ‘The fellow who yelled might be up there,’ he murmured pensively. ‘I’ll go on for a bit and have a look. There’s no need for you to come, Ginger. You take the water home.’

‘That’s a lovely idea,’ sneered Ginger. ‘What if I meet the tiger? What do I do—offer him a drink of water?’

‘Bertie can go with you to keep you company. I shan’t need him. I shan’t be far behind you, anyway. I shall only go as far as the path remains open. Enough leeches will find us on the path, no doubt, without gathering all the bloodsuckers sitting in the jungle. I’ll try to get a view of the next beach to see if any Salones came in during the night. You push off.’

‘Okay.’ Ginger picked up the buckets, which he had stood on the ground while this conversation had been going on. ‘You can go first, Bertie, since you have the musket.’

‘Suits me, old boy.’ Bertie set off down the track followed closely by Ginger.

The return trip was made without trouble, and they were almost in sight of

the beach when from the direction of the camp there came a cry which sounded as if it had been cut off short.

‘That was Chin-Chin,’ said Bertie tersely. ‘Something must be wrong.’ And with that he broke into a run.

Ginger followed as quickly as he could without spilling too much water. He soon lost sight of Bertie, but as he reached the beach he heard him shout.

He burst out into the open just in time to see a man thrusting a way into the jungle. A split second later he saw Bertie fire at the spot, still marked by moving branches. Bertie did not follow up his shot but dashed back to the tent, or the spot where it had stood. It was no longer standing. The guy ropes had been cut and the canvas dragged across the cooking fire. Chintoo lay stretched out in the sand near by.

The next few minutes were something like pandemonium. Bertie dropped his gun and seizing one side of the tent dragged it off the fire, Ginger of course helping him. It had not yet been badly burned except where it had actually been in contact with the fire. Bertie stamped out the flames, Ginger splashing water from his buckets on places where it still smouldered. They did not desist until they were sure the nylon fabric was beyond further damage.

‘We were just in time,’ panted Bertie, speaking for the first time.

‘Who did it?’

‘A Chinese type. He was making for the machine when I arrived. He had a *parang* in his hand. Another minute and he would have been hacking the machine. When he saw me coming he bolted. Spotted I carried a gun, no doubt.’

‘Then I was right. I did see a face.’

‘Absolutely. Let’s see what’s happened to Chin-Chin.’

They hurried to the Malay and examined him; but the only wound they could find was on his head, where the hair was matted with blood. They washed it clean and splashed water on his face. Ginger ran to the aircraft and came back with the brandy flask and a roll of bandage from the medical box. A little of the spirit was dabbed on the wound as an antiseptic, and while Bertie rolled on the bandage Ginger got a few drops of brandy down the injured man’s throat.

‘The devil who did this must have watched us go, then crept up behind Chin-Chin and coshed him,’ grated Bertie. ‘Chin-Chin must have seen him a moment too late. He must have cried out the very moment he was struck.’

‘The sooner Biggles gets back and sees what’s happened the better,’ said Ginger, as he helped to get the stricken man into a more comfortable position.

The Malay opened his eyes and at once tried to get up, but Bertie gently forced him back. ‘Take it easy,’ he said soothingly. ‘No hurry.’

Chintoo, looking dazed, said; ‘What was it?’

‘Somebody hit you on the head. Did you see him?’

Chintoo thought hard. ‘Not see face, Tuan.’

‘Never mind. You lie still for a bit. You’ll soon be all right.’

Ginger and Bertie both took a swig of water and were starting to straighten things out when Biggles marched up. He looked amazed, and not without cause. ‘What the devil’s all this? How did it happen? I heard a shot and hurried back.’

Bertie answered. ‘While we were away some thug coshed Chin-Chin, cut down the tent and threw it on the fire. I’m afraid there’s a hole in it, but we were just in time to save the rest. The machine would have been the next to go.’

‘Who was it? Did you see him?’

‘Only just. He looked Chinese and was dressed like one. He made off when he saw me coming. I let drive at the bushes where he disappeared, but at that range I could only have peppered his hide.’

‘How’s Chintoo?’

‘Not too bad. He’s conscious. We’ve done all we can for him. I told him to lie still for a while. He should soon be on his feet. Where the deuce could that murdering rat have come from?’

‘There’s a Chinese junk lying off the next beach,’ answered Biggles briefly. ‘A dinghy had been pulled up on the sand. Obviously at least one man had come shore. That’s the answer.’

It was the turn of the others to stare.

‘It must have been hanging about here for some days, probably tucked in behind one of the near-by islands, which would account for our not seeing it. The people on it must have landed here, too, at some time, before we arrived. They know their way about.’

‘But why interfere with us?’ asked Ginger hotly.

‘That’s what I’m wondering,’ answered Biggles slowly. ‘This explains another mystery.’

‘Mystery?’

‘Yes. Now I’ll tell you something that’ll surprise you. That tiger of yours has only got one leg.’

Ginger blinked. ‘One *leg*?’

‘Yes. One hind leg, on the left side.’

‘That’s absurd. Is this some kind of a joke?’

‘Anything but that. When I first saw those pug marks I thought there was something queer about them. I’ve seen tiger tracks before. On my way back I had a really close look at ’em, and I saw I was right. We assumed, naturally, that a tiger had been to the pool to drink, which shows you can’t always believe what you see. When a tiger drinks it crouches, with its weight falling on its front legs. Those pugs were made by a *hind* foot, which, with any ordinary tiger would be some way out behind. Not only that, but both pugs marks had been made with the same pad. So not only has this tiger no front legs it has only one hind leg—unless it has two on the same side, on the left. Work that one out.’

There was a long pause. Then Ginger said. ‘Are you telling me those marks

weren't made by a tiger at all?'

'There is no tiger.'

'I don't get it.'

'Those pugs were made by a man using a stuffed, or preserved, tiger's foot. There's no other explanation. And now I have a pretty good idea of who that man was.'

'Well,' breathed Bertie. 'Chase Aunt Annie round the gasworks. That's a good one.'

'It all boils down to this,' went on Biggles. 'Someone doesn't want us here. He wants us out of the way.'

'So he tries to scare us off.'

'That's how it looks to me.'

'But why should anyone do this to us?'

'I don't know—yet. Chinese traders are shrewd, and drive hard bargains, but on the whole they're decent enough fellows.'

'What about that scream we heard?' Ginger asked the question. 'What do you make of that?'

Biggles laid his rifle carefully across a fallen tent pole and lit a cigarette. This is only a guess, but in view of what's happened here I have a feeling it was a decoy to take us away from camp. As it happened we were going up the hill for water, anyway; but had we simply been sitting here, no doubt curiosity would have tempted us to investigate. I may be wrong. It may have been a genuine cry for help. Anything can happen in the jungle. But as the call wasn't repeated, I suspect it was a trick.'

'But that implies someone is definitely out to do us a mischief.'

'That's pretty obvious.'

'But why? For what possible reason? Could it be that coastguard, what's his name—Yomas—who...'

Biggles shook his head. 'He had nothing to do with this, although I'm not fooling myself that we've seen the last of him. With the law to back him up there would be no need for him to use roundabout methods. Besides, had he been responsible for this he would have made it clear, still hoping we'd buy him off to save ourselves further trouble.'

'But someone is trying to drive us away.'

'That's the answer. It leads to another question, why? Again, there can only be one answer. Someone has a pretty good idea of why we're here. Maybe more than one person. First we had the coastguard. There was really no reason why he should have gone out of his way to interfere with us. Now this. I'm afraid we've got more trouble on our plate than we bargained for.'

'What are we going to do about it?'

'What *can* we do about it—except carry on and watch how we go?'

'How about going round to the junk?'

'For what purpose?'

'To ask them what the hell they think they're playing at.'

‘We might find we’d bitten off more than we could chew. There could be a dozen men aboard that craft.’

Bertie came back. ‘But listen, old boy; we can’t stay here in these conditions, unless we’re prepared to risk having our throats cut one dark night.’

Ginger supported his argument. ‘If they’re prepared to go as far as murder we could be shot in broad daylight by someone skulking on the edge of the jungle. Why not move to another island?’

‘That’s just what someone wants us to do,’ returned Biggles. ‘As for shooting us, that could have been done already without much difficulty. I always jib at having to give way to force. Suppose we did move to another island? I can’t see that would make a lot of difference. What has happened here could happen there. I feel inclined to stay here until we see how far these people are prepared to go. Apart from anything else we shall have to see Mac. He must be on his way here. He may be able to throw some light on the business. There wouldn’t be much point in him dumping our stores here if we’d abandoned the place.’

Polishing his eyeglass thoughtfully, Bertie gave his opinion. ‘You say stay here until we see how far these scallywags are prepared to go. Dash it all. Short of knocking us stone-cold, they can’t go much farther than they’ve gone already—if you see what I mean. Taking it all round we’ve been lucky. Had we been away another five minutes we should have come back to find tent gone, stores gone, plane smashed—the lot. Then we would have been up the creek without a paddle.’

Biggles threw down his cigarette end. ‘We’ve done enough talking. It isn’t getting us anywhere. Before we do anything else I think we’d better tidy up this mess to see how much damage has been done. If we’ve lost our mosquito nets, the next thing we shall all be down with fever. I see Chintoo’s on his feet. That’s one good thing.’

Ginger raised an arm, pointing. ‘Look!’

Moving slowly on a gentle breeze, the junk was standing out to sea.

‘Jolly good,’ declared Bertie. The blighters are pulling out. That settles the argument. Now we can get on.’

Biggles did not answer. He stood watching the junk with a wrinkled brow.

‘What’s on your mind?’ asked Ginger.

‘I’m wondering.’

‘Wondering what?’

‘Why they’re going.’

‘Isn’t the fact that they’re going enough?’

‘It might be another trick, to throw us off our guard.’

‘How do you mean?’

‘How do we know all the crew are on board? Some may have been left ashore. But we’ll deal with that if and when the time comes. Let’s get the place shipshape. But before I do anything else I’ll get these leeches off my

legs. I see you have some, too. What a curse they are. One can't step off the beaten track without them finding you. A pinch of salt dropped on one will usually cause him to let go.'

CHAPTER 8

BERTIE GETS TOUGH

The camp was put back into order, things not being as bad as might have been expected. Chintoo, in spite of protests that this was unnecessary, helped with the work. Like many of his type, apparently he had the faculty of making a quick recovery from a wound that would have kept most Europeans on their backs for days.

An eye was kept on the junk until it was hidden from sight by a hump-backed island that stood up out of the blue water like a great green mushroom about two miles away. It was one that had not yet been explored. 'When we get into the air we'll see whether it has really gone or only moved to another anchorage,' remarked Biggles casually.

Watch was also kept for the *Alora*, but it did not appear.

The tent was re-erected. It had a hole in it, not in the roof, fortunately, but in one side; but apart from that had suffered no serious damage. It was thought it might be possible to repair this later on. From time to time Biggles threw an anxious glance at the sky. Its usual cerulean colour had faded to a more pallid hue and there was a misty look on the horizon. 'The wind's freshening,' he observed. 'I hope we're not going to have a blow. It could hold us up. We'll get the machine head to wind and be ready to anchor her down if need be. There's plenty of sand. We've enough bags of one sort or another we can fill. They should hold her.'

More water was needed, most of the supply which Ginger had fetched having been used on the tent as a fire extinguisher. Bertie made light of it. Taking the empty buckets, and the rifle, he went off, presently to return with them full and report there were no more tiger marks at the pool.

'How are we going to find out if that junk left anyone ashore here?' Ginger wanted to know as they sat down to a meal of boiled rice, which was now their staple in place of bread, with canned meat and vegetables. 'I was thinking,' he went on. 'We can't take the machine off without noise, so anyone on the next beach, realizing what we were doing, would have ample time to take cover.'

'You make a good point there,' answered Biggles. 'I must say it would be a relief to know they'd all gone. If we're not sure of that I'm afraid it'll mean mounting a night guard, or we'd be asking for trouble. A guard is no great hardship, but it's a nuisance. It never occurred to me that anything of the sort would be necessary on these islands.'

'If we're not in a hurry to go anywhere how about me doing a spot of scouting?' offered Bertie.

'How?'

'I could either go to the top of the hill, using the path, and look down on

the next beach, or I might be able to find a way along the coast. It can't be more than a couple of miles to the beach, and if anyone was left here that's where he'd be.'

'Fair enough,' agreed Biggles. 'It's up to you. We shan't do any flying today.'

'In that case I might as well go with him,' said Ginger.

'All right. Two's company. One never knows what's going to turn up on a place like this, and it isn't really wise for anyone to wander about on his own. I'd send Chintoo with you, but he'd better not exert himself too much just yet. Take the rifle. If you can get something for the pot we could do with it. We don't want a monkey, though. I'm told it isn't bad, but I never could fancy monkey meat. It's a bit too much like eating a baby. Don't do any shooting till you've had a look at the beach and made sure there's nobody there.' Again Biggles threw an anxious eye round the sky. 'Don't be too long,' he continued. 'This scud might blow over, but it could mean something nasty. Just a minute. I'll see what the barometer is doing.'

He went to the aircraft. When he returned he had an automatic in his hand. He said to Ginger, 'I may need a gun here, and you'd better take the rifle; you may need it,' he said. 'The glass is falling,' he announced. 'At this time of the year that can only mean a change of weather. Pity. But it may only be temporary. Press on and see what you can find out.'

'I shall try to get round by the coast,' decided Bertie.

'Good idea. It'll be interesting to know if it's possible, in case of emergency. If not, try the hill.'

Bertie and Ginger set off.

At first there was no great difficulty, although they had to do a fair amount of climbing over boulders rising out of the sand. When these were dry, above the high-water mark, while they made the going heavy they were merely obstacles. Below the water-line it was a different matter, the seaweed being slippery and treacherous. Sometimes they found it easier to wade. Before them, always, on patches of sand, they were watched suspiciously by armies of red crabs.

Behind the narrow strip of open ground, which varied between twenty and forty yards, the jungle pressed down like a solid green wall, hiding everything except monkeys which, leaping from tree to tree, sometimes kept pace with them for a distance.

For a while they made steady progress and were soon out of sight of the camp. Surmounting a considerable chaos of rock, which formed a little promontory, the next stretch of coast was revealed; but not the beach that was their objective, for this was still hidden behind another barrier of rock. Progress was now harder, and consequently slower, but there was no serious obstruction, so they were able to continue on.

'We should be able to see the beach when we get over that next big lump of rock,' said Bertie, encouragingly, during a pause for breath.

‘Biggles was right about the weather,’ was Ginger’s reply. ‘I don’t like the way the sea’s getting up.’ No longer flat calm, it was heaving in a long oily swell, with waves, not very high as yet, beginning to pound the land. ‘You realize, I hope, that in a really big sea we wouldn’t be able to get back this way.’

‘I wouldn’t worry about that, dear boy,’ returned Bertie, casually. ‘The island isn’t likely to sink and we can always go back over the hill.’

‘I trust you’re right,’ answered Ginger. ‘We’ve been caught like this before. I don’t trust islands as much as I did since that business in Scotland.’¹

They continued on their way until they were brought to a halt by what Bertie had referred to as the next lump of rock. From the closer view it was more than a lump. It was a massive buttress which started in the jungle and ran on down into deep water, so that it was not possible to get round it. The side facing them was in the nature of a low cliff perhaps twenty feet high, and presented a formidable obstacle.

‘We shall be able to get over it somehow,’ declared Bertie cheerfully. ‘From the top, if I’ve got my bearings right, we should be able to see the beach. That’s all we came for. Here, lay hold of the old *bundook* while I see what I can make of it.’ He handed the rifle to Ginger and began to climb.

Slowly and laboriously, feeling for fingerholds, taking risks that made Ginger hold his breath, he made his way up the face of the barrier and eventually dragged himself to the top. Lying flat he looked beyond, keeping quite still.

Ginger became impatient. ‘What is it? What are you looking at?’

Bertie turned slowly and crooked a finger. ‘Come and have a dekkko. I’ll take the rifle.’ He reached down.

By following the route Bertie had taken Ginger was soon able to pass up the rifle. With his hands free he went on up until, getting some help from Bertie, he was able to join him and take in what had been hidden.

The first thing he noticed was, the drop on the far side of the rock was not sheer. It sloped down at a fairly steep angle, like the roof of a house, to sand that had been piled up against it by wind or water. This ran down to the beach. On it a dinghy had been drawn up. Well behind, above the high-water mark and some forty or fifty yards from where they lay, two men squatted by the smouldering embers of a fire. Their attitudes were peculiar. One, stripped to the waist, had his shoulders hunched, while his companion, close up, appeared to be scratching his back with the point of a dagger. Their positions reminded Ginger of a pair of monkeys searching for fleas.

In the dirty, ragged, blue cotton trousers commonly worn by Asiatic labourers, from a distance it was impossible to make out their nationalities. Their skins were on the dark side, so they might almost have been anything—Burmese, Siamese, Indonesians, Philipinos, or a mixture of any of these. Intent on what they were doing, they did not look up. Ginger’s first thought was, so Biggles had been right. The junk had left some men behind.

‘What on earth are they doing?’ he whispered.

Bertie chuckled, although there was a glint in his eye. ‘I can tell you, old boy, because I once had to go through the same ordeal after a silly ass, firing blind through a hedge at a rabbit, plastered me with a charge of number six shot. I was a kid at the time. Our gamekeeper, scared of what my father would say, made me strip to the waist so that he could pick out the pellets with the point of his knife. Having gone through a thick jacket, they were only just under the skin. That johnny having his back done must be the one I pooped off at this morning. So I did hit him. Stung his hide good and hard, I hope. If I had the gun instead of the rifle I’d give the swine another packet for coshing poor old Chin-Chin on the boko.’

‘And cutting down our tent. Why were they left here, do you suppose?’

‘Not for our good, you may be sure. It could be they hadn’t returned when the junk, seeing the weather changing, decided to move to a safer anchorage. It can’t be far away.’ Turning on an elbow, Bertie looked across at the next island.

‘Yes, there she is,’ he observed. ‘You can see the top of her mast. I imagine it’ll come back for this pair of scabs when the sea goes down.’

This remark caused Ginger to look back the way they had come. Waves were now breaking all along the shore. ‘We shall never get back over the rocks,’ he said anxiously.

‘Then we’ll go home across the hill. What does it matter?’

‘That’s assuming there’s a path.’

‘There’s bound to be one, or the chap having his back prodded couldn’t have got here. He came to our camp and he didn’t go home along the coast. He bolted into the jungle.’

‘If we go down to the beach they’ll see us.’

‘What of it? Are we scared of ’em? Not me. I feel like kicking them in the pants for what they did in our camp this morning. Dash it all; we’ve every right to ask questions.’

‘I wonder what Biggles would do in a case like this?’

‘He isn’t here, so we can’t ask him. It’s time we could make up our own minds.’

‘How are you going to talk to ’em? They may not speak English. This is where we need Chintoo.’

‘They won’t need to speak English to understand what I’m going to tell ’em, the lousy dogs,’ asserted Bertie in a hard voice.

‘You’re really going down?’

‘Too true I am. Are we going to let a couple of ruffians get away with attempted murder, to say nothing of trying to burn our tent? Not on your nellie, old boy; not on your sweet nellie.’

‘Okay, if that’s how you feel. I’m with you. What if they won’t talk?’

‘We’ll kick ’em off the island. They’ve got a boat. They’re not staying here, no bally fear, not if I know it.’

‘The sea’s getting pretty rough.’

‘So much the better. They won’t drown. If they do they’ll be a treat for the sharks. After what they’ve done I’m not exactly overflowing with the milk of human kindness.’

‘So I notice.’

‘As far as I’m concerned they’re a couple of murderers. They might have killed Chin-Chin—and a fat lot they’d have cared.’

‘Just a minute. That looks like a gun of some sort lying on the ground beside ’em.’

‘If we go quietly we shall have the drop on them.’

‘Biggles won’t be pleased if we start a gun battle.’

‘There won’t be any battle. If they reach for that gun you’ll see how fast I can shoot.’

‘Good enough. Lead on, Marshal Dillon.’

They slid quietly down the slope to the beach and edged towards the jungle to come up behind the men still engaged in the shot-extracting operation. Their feet making no sound on the soft sand, they were able to advance swiftly, and were within yards before one of the men sensed their presence. He leapt up, grabbing for an antiquated rifle that lay on the sand.

‘Hold it,’ cracked Bertie, jerking forward his rifle.

His prediction had been correct. The men may not have understood the words, but they knew what he meant. They raised their hands and stood still. Guilty consciences may have been responsible for their quick submission.

Ginger, pistol in hand, kicked aside the old rifle. It fell across the fire, but he appeared not to notice it, going on quickly to take the dagger from the man who held it. ‘You speak English?’ snapped Bertie.

There was no answer. The two men, with flat, brutish faces, just stood there, expressions inscrutable.

Bertie fetched the nearer a resounding cuff on the ear.

‘Speak,’ he barked.

The man spoke. Startled, he uttered one word. ‘Yes.’

‘That’s better,’ growled Bertie. ‘What are you doing here?’

No answer.

‘Who sent you to our camp this morning?’

No answer.

Bertie pointed to the island. ‘Is that your ship?’

No answer. The faces might have been graven images.

Eyeing the wounded man sternly, Bertie touched one of the shot marks. ‘How come?’ he demanded.

Still no answer.

‘You’re wasting your time,’ muttered Ginger. ‘They don’t know what you’re talking about.’

‘They know all right, but it suits them to pretend to be dumb,’ sneered Bertie.

‘If they take that line you’ll get nothing out of ’em. You can’t shoot ’em in cold blood, so you might as well let ’em go.’

‘To knife us as soon as our backs are turned? They’ll move fast enough then.’

‘What do we want to know, anyway? We know what they did, and they must know we know. That’s why they won’t talk. What can they say? You can hardly expect them to admit they knocked our man on the head in order to bust up our camp.’

‘I want to know who told ’em to do it. It must have been someone on that junk. They wouldn’t be likely to attack us without orders. The trouble with orientals is they don’t seem to care two hoots whether they live or die. Why were they left here? Either to watch us or do us more mischief. Well, I’m not going to leave them here, expecting my head to be sliced off by a *parang* every time I turn a corner. I see they’ve got one lying there. No doubt it’s the one that cut our tent ropes.’

Ginger shrugged helplessly. ‘What can you do?’

‘Send ’em after the junk. That’s where they belong.’ Bertie looked back at the two natives, and raising a finger pointed to the dinghy. ‘Go,’ he ordered.

The men looked at each other.

Bertie raised the rifle. ‘Go,’ he repeated. ‘I count five then I shoot.’ He raised five fingers, one after the other, counting, to make his meaning clear.

The men began to back away. At a distance of a few yards they turned and shuffled on towards the dinghy.

Bertie and Ginger, saying nothing, watched them launch it, and getting in, begin to row in the direction of the island behind which the junk lay.

‘I can’t see that’s done us much good,’ said Ginger gloomily.

‘It’s better than leaving them here. I shall sleep more comfortably knowing they’re out of the way. A couple of cutthroats, if ever I saw any. They knew what I was talking about.’

‘All right. That’s that,’ returned Ginger. ‘Now we’d better see about getting back. I don’t like this wind. Biggles may need help. He’ll be wondering what’s keeping us.’

At this moment a curious thing happened. It made them both jump. The old rifle that had fallen across the fire exploded, the bullet ploughing up the sand between them.

‘Great Scott!’ cried Ginger, aghast. ‘We might have been shot!’

‘That was careless of us,’ admitted Bertie. ‘We should have guessed that ancient blunderbuss would be loaded. How stupid can one be? Never mind. It missed us. That’s all that matters. Let’s get cracking.’

They walked back to the rock barrier and from the top could see the dinghy rocking as it made its way to the junk. Then a glance along the foreshore showed them all they needed to know—a line of pounding foam and spray as breakers rolled in from the now turbulent sea.

‘That settles that,’ said Ginger. ‘We shan’t get back that way.’

‘I don’t know. We might just do it.’

‘And get trapped half-way? Not me. Why risk it? There must be a way across the hill or those coolies couldn’t have got to our camp. The Salones could have made it when they were here. It may have got overgrown since then, but it shouldn’t be hard to find. At least we know we shan’t meet any tigers.’

Bertie agreed it might be more prudent to adopt Ginger’s method of getting home.

A short walk along the outskirts of the jungle that backed the beach brought them to what they were looking for, an opening where some bamboos had been cut to make a narrow pathway leading into the undergrowth. Footprints in the mush of dead leaves showed it had been used recently. Without a word they entered it, Bertie, having the rifle, going first. It was uphill work on a greasy track to the shoulder of the hill, and no breath was wasted in conversation after Ginger had warned to be on the look-out for cobras.

Reaching the highest point, the ground was nearly all rock, the undergrowth being more open and the trees not so big. Here at the top of the hill there was a more or less flat stretch, and as they strode along it Bertie suddenly stopped, looking at something at his feet. Stooping he picked up an object and turned to show it to Ginger, saying: ‘You know, old boy, Biggles really is a bit of a wizard. Not many people would have seen through that fake tiger trick. Look at this.’ He held out the thing he had picked up. It was a tiger’s pad, complete, with some loose skin left on it into which a hand could be inserted in the manner of a glove.

After staring at it curiously, Ginger raised his eyes to Bertie’s face. ‘So that’s it. Why would anyone carry a thing like that around with him? He couldn’t have known he was going to use it to fool us.’

Bertie examined it closely through his monocle. ‘It might have been a fetish, or a sort of lucky charm. People have queer tastes.’

‘Why did he leave it here?’

‘I wouldn’t say he left it. He must have dropped it.’

‘Why drop it? Why not pick it up?’

‘He may have been in too much of a hurry. Perhaps something gave him a fright.’

‘That’s more like it. That could account for it.’

‘For what?’

‘That yell we heard. The fellow who went to the pool to make the pug mark may have got as far back as this when something put the wind up him, whereupon he let out a yell and bolted, dropping the dummy foot. Ha! It’d be a joke if he bumped into a real tiger. He must have been badly scared because he didn’t come back... to...’ Ginger’s voice trailed away. His eyes, slowly saucerizing, were fixed on something on the path ahead.

Bertie, startled by his expression, turned his head to look.

A little farther along a tiger was stepping out of the jungle. Seeing the men it stopped, gazed at them for a few seconds without the slightest show of hostility, then stepping daintily like the big cat it was, disappeared without a sound on the opposite side of the path.

For a little while neither Bertie nor Ginger spoke. Then Bertie said: 'I don't believe it. It isn't true. First there was a tiger. Then there wasn't one. Now there is. Or is there? Did you see what I saw?'

'I saw a tiger.'

'That's what I thought. But dash it all, old boy, these things don't happen.'

'This one did,' retorted Ginger grimly. 'Keep your finger on the trigger. He might change his mind. Stand still and give him a chance to get clear. We've got to pass that spot. You may think this is funny, but I don't.'

'Not funny, dear boy. Fantastic. That's the word. Fantastic. Biggles isn't going to believe this when we tell him. Matter of fact I'm finding it a bit hard to believe myself.'

'Don't talk so much. He may be listening.'

'I wouldn't worry. That tiger was practically tame. I'd say he was born in a circus and escaped.'

'Will you stop fooling? All I'm concerned with escaping from is this stinking jungle. Now we know what gave that coolie a fright. He didn't think it was funny, either.'

'Seriously, old boy, shall I tell you why that handsome fellow took no notice of us?'

'I'm listening.'

'I'd bet you any money he's never been hunted. He merely took us for a couple of overgrown monkeys. He would have purred had we given him a pat. Wild animals are like that if they're left alone.'

'So you say. If you're so sure about that beast being friendly, press on. If he doesn't get you I'll follow.'

'Certainly.' Bertie walked on.

Nothing happened.

Having passed the spot, he turned and raised a thumb.

Ginger followed. Staring into the jungle as he went through the danger area he caught a fleeting glimpse of a black and orange striped body fading into the gloom. With no small relief he hurried on to catch up with Bertie, who had stopped to wait for him. 'Keep going,' he requested pithily. 'This is no place to sit down and admire the scenery.'

They went on, had a quick drink at the pool in passing, and without further adventure reached the beach, where they were surprised by the violence of the wind. In the forest the full effect of it had not been evident.

Seeing them Biggles shouted: 'Come on. I want you. Can't you see what's happening?'

They hurried to join him as, with the help of Chintoo, he drove pegs under the aircraft.

‘Where the heck have you been all this time?’ he demanded angrily as they joined him. ‘The bottom’s dropping out of the barometer. We’re in for a sumatran, and a stinker, at that. The junk must have smelt it coming.’

‘It’s lying under the lee of that island over there,’ informed Bertie. ‘One way and another we’ve had quite an afternoon.’

‘You can tell me about it later.’

‘I’ve brought you a souvenir.’ Bertie held out the tiger paw.

Biggles brushed it aside. ‘Never mind about that now. We’ve got to work fast.’

Bertie looked at Ginger sadly. ‘There ain’t no gratitude in the world,’ he lamented.

¹ See *Biggles Takes It Rough*.

CHAPTER 9

ANOTHER CLUE

The protection of the camp, more particularly the aircraft, as the storm approached, became a race against time. The machine, having been turned dead into wind, was anchored with pegs and sand-bags. Nothing more could be done. The same with the tent after sand had been heaped on the skirts to hold it down. The burnt hole, while not a large one, was a hazard as the wind poured through it and threatened to lift the whole thing into the air like a balloon. There had been no time to consider how it could be repaired. Luckily the mosquito nets were still serviceable, not that they were likely to be required in the present weather conditions.

‘I thought this material was supposed to be fireproof,’ said Ginger indignantly, as they worked.

‘It is, more or less,’ answered Biggles. ‘If it hadn’t been it would have gone up in flames before anything could be done about it. But I doubt if any stuff would stand direct contact with red-hot ashes without some damage. Well, that’s about as much as we can do. We shall have to take our luck. Let’s get inside before the rain comes, because when it does it won’t start with a drizzle. It’ll come down in buckets. Chintoo will have to come in with us. He can’t stay outside. Call him in. This will mean a cold supper out of a tin.’

It was now nearly dark, and not only because the sun was low. The entire sky was covered with a blanket of black, ominous, fast-moving cloud. The wind, shrieking, increased to hurricane force. Seas thundered on the beach. Then, without warning as Biggles had predicted, came the rain. From the noise it made the cloud had burst wide open, discharging its contents like liquid ramrods. A ground-sheet was held over the hole in the tent, but inevitably some water came through.

‘How long is this likely to last?’ shouted Ginger above the uproar.

Biggles shook his head. ‘Don’t ask me. Ask Chintoo.’

Chintoo didn’t know either.

Conversation became impossible. Sleep was out of the question. More than once it was thought that the tent would go. For nearly four hours these conditions persisted, but by midnight the full fury of the storm was spent, or the centre of it had passed on. The wind came in less violent gusts. It still rained, but not so heavily. There was less noise.

Biggles put out his head to see how the aircraft was taking it, by no means certain it was still there. ‘Can’t see a thing,’ he announced. ‘Pitch black. Thank God there was no hail or the wings would have been knocked into colanders. I’ve seen that happen in monsoon weather. I can hear the sea pretty close, but I don’t think it will reach us now. It should be on the ebb. You realize what this means?’

‘In what way?’ asked Ginger.

‘We’re grounded. There can be no more flying till the sea goes down. There isn’t room on the beach to get off, and with this sea running it would be madness to try to put the machine on the water. Apart from that, only in a dead calm sea could we do any good. Now we can hear ourselves speak, you can tell me what happened this afternoon.’

Ginger, with occasional remarks from Bertie, narrated their adventures.

Biggles heard the story in silence.

‘I hope we did the right thing,’ concluded Bertie. ‘I didn’t feel like leaving those two toughs on the island to carry on with their dirty work. We don’t know what they would have tried next.’

‘I think you were right,’ replied Biggles. They’re obviously acting under orders. If they were on their own they wouldn’t dare to touch us. There must be someone on board that junk who’s interested in what we’re doing. As I said before, the junk has as much right to be here as we have. If the idea is to get us off the island the owner might lay a complaint against us for shooting one of his men.’

‘Look what he did to us! Haven’t we got a complaint?’ demanded Ginger hotly.

‘Of course we have. But could we prove it? The outcome of an argument would probably depend on which story the authorities preferred to believe. If it was left to that fellow Yomas we know which side he’d take. Remember, we’re stuck here and couldn’t get away if we wanted to, at all events until the sea calms down. Otherwise I’d feel inclined to keep on the move in case Yomas looks for us. Another unfortunate thing about the storm is, it might hold up the *Alora*. We need the stores she’s bringing us. In a calm sea we could go out to look for her, and maybe land alongside; but with the sea as it is it’s no use thinking of that, and we don’t know how long it will be before it goes down. It may take days. All we can do is hang on here hoping there will be no more trouble before Mac gets here.’

‘I wonder how the junk weathered the storm,’ put in Bertie. ‘It would suit us if she was blown ashore.’

‘I wouldn’t pin any hopes on that,’ answered Biggles. These craft may look unwieldy, but they have the reputation of being able to stand up to almost anything. Were it otherwise they wouldn’t last long in these waters, when the monsoon hits them. No. They saw the storm coming and moved to a safer anchorage without waiting for the two men who were ashore. That’s my guess. Of course, there might have been another reason for leaving them where you found them. We don’t know.’

‘What about the tiger?’ queried Ginger. ‘Can you beat that? When I saw one staring me in the face I couldn’t believe my eyes. You could have knocked me flat with a feather.’

Biggles smiled. ‘Good thing there were no birds about. It all goes to show.’
‘Show what?’

‘That truth is stranger than fiction. People have been saying that for thousands of years, but for some extraordinary reason they’re still astonished when anything unusual happens. But the storm seems to have blown itself out of breath somewhat, so it might be a good idea to get some sleep or we shall be fit for nothing tomorrow. Before we settle down, for my peace of mind I’ll make sure the machine’s still there.’ Parting the flap he crept out.

‘It’s still there, and as far as I can make out there’s been no harm done,’ he informed the others, when he returned.

There was no more talking.

The morning broke fine and clear, with only a few scattered fragments of cloud being hounded across a blue sky by a stiffish breeze. There was still an ugly sea running, as was to be expected, successive breakers throwing snow-white curtains of lace far up the beach. They had cast up tangled heaps of debris, seaweed, coconuts, palm fronds and the like. The forest trees presented a bedraggled appearance, with branches torn off and sometimes stripped of leaves. Monkeys had come down and were having a banquet of crabs. Chintoo collected some coconuts.

‘If the *Alora* doesn’t soon show up we shall be on short rations,’ remarked Biggles, as they lingered over breakfast with nothing to do after they had satisfied themselves that the aircraft had escaped damage and the engines had been tested. ‘We’re not likely to starve, or anything like that, because at a pinch, while we have petrol, we can always slip across to the mainland. But as things are I’d rather not risk coming into collision with that snooty little upstart Yomas.’

‘Anything as long as we don’t have to go on a diet of coconuts, old boy,’ said Bertie. ‘I know that sort of thing is done in books; but this isn’t a book, and after all, I mean to say, if a bellyful of coconut doesn’t give a man indigestion—well, I ask you.’

‘All right. Go and shoot something.’

‘That’s not a bad idea. I could tear a couple of pork shops. I might have a look for the *Vagabond* at the same time. One never knows. We’ve only skimmed round the outside of the island. We haven’t made a proper search.’

‘Fair enough. Go ahead. We can’t do any flying, so you might as well do something useful as squat on your haunches all day. I shall stay here in case the *Alora* shows up. Ginger can go with you if he cares to. But don’t get into mischief. A casualty at this stage would do nothing to improve matters. I’d keep off the hill. That tiger may be in a different mood if he hasn’t had his breakfast.’

‘I was thinking of strolling along the coast, not the way we went yesterday. The other direction, to cover new ground.’

‘Okay. Keep clear of the mangroves. There’ll be crocodiles there.’

‘You bet.’

‘Take the rifle.’

‘I’ll do that. With any luck it’ll be beefsteak for dinner.’

In a few minutes Bertie and Ginger were on their way, walking along close to the jungle behind a mass of refuse left by the receding tide. At the highest point reached by the sea, stuff had been hurled on the shrubs and the lower branches of trees. It was not only seaweed. There was a strange assortment of other things, from driftwood to dead monkeys, from whole trees to coconuts. There was even a drowned buffalo, partly eaten by something either in the sea or after it had been washed ashore.

‘These storms certainly do stir things up,’ said Bertie as they went on their way.

They came to a turtle, still alive but helpless on its back. They turned it over and watched it drag itself clumsily towards the sea. Crabs, alive and dead, were everywhere.

Presently Ginger pointed to an object projecting from the sand above the latest flotsam deposited by the storm. ‘It must have been a snorter that chucked things as high as that,’ he remarked. ‘It looks like half a lifebuoy. From some wreck, I suppose. I wonder what became of the wretched man who tried to save himself with it. The name of the ship might still be on it. Let’s have a look.’ He went to it, and putting both hands through the semi-circle, tugged. It did not move. ‘It must have been here for a long time,’ he said, pulling again, using all his weight.

Bertie scraped away some of the sand that held it and with difficulty dragged the lifebuoy clear. It was the usual circle of cork covered with canvas that had once been white. Ginger brushed the dry sand off it. The top was blank. He turned it over. The part that had been exposed to the weather was blank, even the paint having been rubbed off; but on the section that had been underground four letters could still be read. They were VAGA.

They both stared, realizing simultaneously what they had found.

‘*Vagabond*,’ breathed Ginger, dramatically.

‘Absolutely.’

‘What a thing to find!’

The *Vagabond* must have ended up not far from here.’

Ginger looked dubious. ‘We can’t be sure of that. This thing may have been floating about for a long time. We hear of bottles travelling enormous distances.’

‘A bottle perhaps,’ argued Bertie. ‘But this isn’t glass. This wouldn’t have to be long in the water for the paint to be worn off. But look, the stitching hasn’t started to come undone.’

‘It’s a mighty interesting find, anyway. Biggles ought to see this.’

‘We’ll certainly take it back with us when we go, but I can’t see there’s any hurry about that. Hang it on a bush so we can’t miss it.’

‘I think we ought to take it back right away.’

‘An hour is neither here nor there. I have a feeling we might find something else, even perhaps the remains of the schooner. That would be a fair knock-out. We’ve nothing to do if we go back. Let us at least go as far as

the mangroves. That won't take long. Besides, we might get a shot at something. I promised Biggles fresh meat for supper.'

Ginger shrugged. 'All right. Have it your way.' He hung the lifebuoy on a convenient bush, in a conspicuous position. 'Lead on. You've got the rifle.'

They went on, walking slowly, towards the mangroves, Bertie holding the rifle ready for a quick shot should one offer. But the only living things they saw were gulls, crabs and monkeys. Reaching the beginning of the mangroves, they paused to consider a quite well-beaten game track where animals of one sort or another had skirted the dangerous, crocodile-infested swamp. It wound through ordinary trees and jungle on the dry ground.

'There should be a pig or something along here,' said Bertie.

'Okay. We'll go a little way if you like,' agreed Ginger. 'I only hope we don't meet another tiger with the same ideas as we have.'

'I'll have a peep round that next bend.' Bertie advanced cautiously.

Ginger kept a little way behind as the track meandered, sometimes close to the liquid mud from which the mangroves rose, and occasionally into the more solid terrain that supported the normal forest. It was never possible to see very far ahead.

They both froze as from the right-hand side there came a curious barking sound, not unlike that of a small dog. It was repeated, closer. And again. The creature responsible was revealed when from the jungle, some twenty yards ahead, there stepped a deer. It was not a very big animal; about the size of a British roe.

Bertie raised his rifle, but before he could fire the deer had walked on and disappeared round a bend.

Ginger moved swiftly but silently to join Bertie. 'Go on,' he urged. 'That was good venison. It must have been what is called a barking deer. I've heard of them. Hurry, you still might be in time for a shot.'

As they moved forward to see beyond the bend round which the animal had disappeared, there suddenly broke upon the sultry air a startled gasp and a great noise of crashing. Turning the corner they saw the reason. A huge snake, easily recognizable as a python, had apparently dropped from the overhanging branch of a tree on the unlucky animal.

Some people, who have only seen big constricting snakes in zoological gardens, may be under the impression that they are slow, sluggish movers. Ginger was one. He was now to learn differently. The speed with which the serpent wrapped itself round the deer shocked and amazed him. In a moment the wretched animal was so enveloped that it had no hope of escape. With the life being crushed out of it, unable to support the great weight of its attacker, it sank down, its mouth open, eyes protruding with terror.

Bertie stepped forward.

'What are you going to do?' asked Ginger tersely.

'Shoot the snake.'

'Don't be a fool.'

‘I can’t stand here and watch this.’

‘Keep out of the way. This has nothing to do with us.’

‘Don’t you believe it.’ Bertie took another pace forward.

‘Are you crazy? If it turns on you you’re finished.’

Bertie walked forward. The python raised its head from its now motionless prey, its long tongue flickering. Bertie approached to within five yards. He took deliberate aim. The rifle crashed.

Ginger thought he saw a piece of the reptile’s head fly off; and the python behaved as though it had. It appeared to go mad.

Bertie stepped back hastily as, unwinding itself from the deer, it flung itself about in gigantic loops which revealed its full size. It crashed into the undergrowth always going down a gradient that ended in the swamp. There, still whirling like a flail, it ended up in muddy water. Ripples streaked towards the spot. The water boiled. It vanished. The water subsided.

‘Crocodile meat,’ said Bertie calmly. ‘You know, old boy,’ he went on seriously, ‘if the deer hadn’t been in front that thing would probably have dropped on one of us. It must have been on the branch waiting for anything to pass underneath.’

Ginger shuddered. ‘What a horror. Let’s get out of this. I’ve had about enough of islands.’

‘Hold hard. What about the deer?’

They examined it. It was dead.

‘Probably died of shock,’ surmised Bertie.

‘By thunder! It had every reason to,’ asserted Ginger vehemently.

‘Well, lay hold of one end and I’ll take the other.’

‘What are you going to do?’

‘Take it home, of course. There’s nothing wrong with it. We’ll have venison for supper after all. I’m not mad about it. The meat is too dry. It needs some fat bacon rind threading through it to make it succulent.’

‘You’re too fastidious. We’re on an island—remember?’

They picked up the dead beast and found it heavy.

‘We need only take it as far as the beach,’ decided Bertie. ‘We’ll send Chin-Chin along to carve it up and bring home the best joints.’

They set off, and reaching the beach well beyond the mangroves dumped the carcass on the sand.

‘The sea’s gone down quite a bit,’ observed Ginger, as they went on.

Collecting the lifebuoy on the way they returned to camp.

Biggles regarded the lifebuoy with disfavour. ‘Is that the best you could do?’ he inquired sarcastically. ‘Did you have to shoot it?’

‘Shoot it?’

‘I heard a shot.’

‘Oh that. No. We’ve got a deer. I’m going to send Chin-Chin along to fetch it. But what about this?’ He turned the lifebuoy so that what was left of the name could be read. Biggles’s eyes opened wide. ‘That *is* something,’ he

agreed. 'Where did you find it?'

Ginger explained.

'I feel that should help us, but I can't quite see how,' Biggles said thoughtfully. 'It's too vague. We don't know where the buoy was used or how far it has travelled since. I see one chance. The thing must have drifted here on a current. If we knew the general line of that current we could follow it up and concentrate on any islands on its course.'

'That's supposing the *Vagabond* was wrecked on one of them.'

'Of course. Mac should know how the currents run. If he doesn't nobody does. We'll ask him. The sea's dropping. We should be able to get airborne tomorrow. What with the lifebuoy and some fresh meat, you've done a good morning's work. That's enough to go on with.'

Ginger described to Chintoo where the carcass of the deer lay and the Malay went off to fetch it.

CHAPTER 10

MORE VISITORS

The following morning showed the sea back nearly to normal. It had not entirely settled down to a flat calm; there was still a long slow swell; but no broken water. After a close inspection Biggles said he thought it would be safe to take the machine off, should a flying programme be decided.

‘To do what?’ asked Ginger.

Biggles paused before answering. ‘It’s hard to know what to do for the best. I don’t like leaving here before Mac comes, and that may happen any time now. I have half a mind to look for him. With so little traffic we should spot the *Alora* from the air. If we knew where he was we’d be able to plan accordingly. Against that I daren’t risk using much petrol, or we’d be breaking our rule always to have enough in hand to get to Penang. An emergency might arise. One of us might have an accident. That has nearly happened more than once. Apart from that, it might be necessary to get to Penang quickly to send a signal to the Air Commodore. Even now he must be wondering what we’re doing.’

‘Have you thought about packing up here?’ asked Bertie.

‘I have. It might be prudent to move camp to another island and so avoid any more trouble with the people on that confounded junk. But again, we come back to the question of Mac. If he comes here and finds we’ve gone he won’t know whether or not to put the stores ashore. If he did leave them while we were away the crew of the junk might find them and pinch the lot.’

‘You think they’d go as far as that?’

‘After what they’ve done already, yes. I have an uncomfortable feeling we haven’t seen the last of that lot. It becomes a question of whether we fly down to Penang first, and then look for Mac, or take a chance of finding Mac and going to Penang afterwards. There’s another point to consider. Mac said he would try to get us some jerricans of petrol. If he was able to do that it wouldn’t be necessary for us to go to Penang for a day or two.’

‘According to the arrangement, Mac’s overdue,’ put in Ginger.

The storm is almost certain to have upset his schedule. I must admit this junk in the offing worries me. I didn’t reckon on interference. I thought we’d have the islands to ourselves, apart from a few Salones who wouldn’t be likely to get in our way. In the ordinary course of events that’s how it would have been.’

‘Speaking of Salones, I think I can see one of their *kabangs* coming now,’ observed Ginger, gazing out to sea.

‘It’s a small boat of some sort,’ confirmed Biggles. ‘Coming from the direction of the mainland. They cross over sometimes. I remember there were one or two at Victoria Point when we were there. This chap seems to be

coming here, so we'd better wait for him. He may know the whereabouts of the *Alora*. Fetch the binoculars, Ginger.'

Ginger brought them from the aircraft. Biggles took them and focused on the approaching boat. 'It's a *kabang*,' he announced. 'Only the Salones use that small square sail made of plaited palm leaves. I see three men in it. Two are starting to row. They must be in a hurry.'

'Could the junk be the reason?' said Bertie.

All eyes switched to the hump-backed island. The junk, with sail set, had rounded the end and was taking up a course as if to cut across that of the native craft.

'What the devil's going on?' muttered Biggles, again raising the binoculars. 'From the way the men in the *kabang* are pulling they don't like the look of the junk. This has got me foxed. If the junk follows the *kabcmg* here there may be trouble. I'd feel more comfortable with a pistol in my pocket, in case this is another attempt to sabotage our camp. Get the pistols out, Ginger, and a couple of clips of ammunition apiece.'

This was done. The pistols, loaded, were pocketed.

Said Ginger, pointing to the lifebuoy, which lay where it had been thrown down: 'Don't you think we'd better put that out of sight?'

'Yes... No. Leave it where it is, with the letters face up.'

Ginger looked astonished. So did Bertie. 'I'd have thought...'

Biggles broke in. He spoke quickly. 'This may tell us something, something I'd very much like to know. I believe these junk people know why we're here—but do they know the name of the ship that was lost with the gold on board? If they don't know the lifebuoy will mean nothing to them; but if they do know the schooner was the *Vagabond*, even if they say nothing, their expressions should tell us all we want to know.'

'I get it,' said Ginger approvingly. 'Only you would think of that.'

The *kabang* was the first of the two craft to get to the beach, beating the junk by a quarter of a mile, one reason for this being that the junk, finding itself in shallow water, had to lower sail. The *kabang* came right in. One man jumped out and ran towards the camp.

'It is Laon,' said Chintoo, suddenly.

'Laon—who's Laon?' asked Biggles.

'Bosun on *Alora*, Tuan. Like me, Malay.'

'Ah yes. I remember now. I'd forgotten the name. If he's made a special journey to see us, and that's what it looks like, we should soon know what's gone wrong with the *Alora*. I trust it's nothing serious. If it is, all our arrangements will come unstuck, and that would be just too bad.'

Laon started talking before he reached the camp. Speaking directly to Chintoo, a Malay like himself, he used that language. A rapid conversation ensued. Only they knew what it was about.

At last Biggles's patience broke. 'What is it, Chintoo?'

'Trouble, Tuan. Much trouble. The *Alora* has been arrested.'

Biggles stared. 'Arrested!'

'Yes, Tuan.'

'Where?'

'Mergui.'

'Is that where Laon has come from?'

'Yes.'

'Arrested for what?'

'Smuggling.'

'Smuggling what?'

'Opium.'

'Who says so?'

'Captain Yomas.'

'Ah! So that's the game.' Biggles half-turned to the others. 'It's ridiculous,' he declared indignantly. 'Everyone along the coast uses opium. It's grown in Siam, next door. Opium here means no more than tobacco at home. It's a common article of trade. You can buy it anywhere. Men won't work without it. Mac told me so. This is a trumped-up charge.' He turned back to Laon. 'Where is *Alora* now?' He guessed that, having worked for so long with Mac, he could speak fair English when necessary.

He was right. 'Mergui,' answered the Malay. 'Not move without permission Captain Yomas.'

'Where is Captain Macdonald?'

'He in prison, Tuan.'

'In *prison*.' Biggles's voice nearly cracked with incredulity.

Chintoo explained. 'There is police hut for people when get drunk.'

Laon resumed. 'Captain Mac tells me find boat, tell you.'

The face that Biggles turned to the others was grim. 'So that's how Yomas hit back at us!'

'Why should he suppose holding the *Alora* would interfere with us?' asked Bertie.

Biggles in turn put this question to Laon, who explained that Yomas had seen Mac buying stores and guessed who they were for.

Chintoo came back. 'Laon says he sees Yomas in Mergui talking Mr. Feng.'

'Feng. You mean the pearl buyer who used to travel on *Alora*?'

'Yes. Laon think Feng on junk.' Chintoo pointed to the junk which, having dropped anchor, was lowering a boat.

'Is this why Laon wanted to get here first?'

'Yes. He think Feng stop him talking to you.'

'The Salones are pushing off,' Ginger pointed out. 'If they go how is Laon to get back to Mergui?'

'No matter. We can fly him back,' said Biggles.

Laon explained that the Salones were the only people he could find willing to bring him across to Chang Island. That was only on the understanding they

were not asked to stay, because their wives were waiting for them at Mergui and they had to get back quickly to the rest of their families.

Biggles nodded. 'I see. The Salones can go. Here come the people from the junk. It'll be interesting to hear what excuse they have for coming here.'

The small boat had been pulled up on the beach. There were five men with it. Two remained. Three advanced towards the tent, two of them obviously crewmen. One carried a rifle. The other man, with a skin the colour of milky coffee, was smartly dressed in a white linen suit.

'It is Feng,' informed Laon, softly.

This begins to add up,' Biggles told the others. 'Remember, he was aboard the *Alora* when Mac found you-know-what. He wanted to buy them. He's worked it out there must be some more about. He wants to be free to look for them. That's why he isn't travelling with Mac as he usually does.'

Feng walked up.

'What can I do for you?' inquired Biggles coldly.

The answer came in fluent English with a reedy oriental accent that blended strangely with an American drawl—as Mac had described. 'You shot one of my men.'

'I should damn well think so after what he did,' retorted Biggles.

'I hope you don't hold me responsible for that.'

'As you admit he's one of your men, I most certainly do. Are you the owner of that junk?'

'Yes.'

Then you'd better keep your crew under control because it'll be bullets next time, not pellets.'

'You had no right to turn him off the island.'

'He was lucky to get off so lightly. Had I seen him I'd have been tempted to finish what my friend here started. Perhaps he forgot to tell you that he clubbed the man I left in charge of my camp. Now suppose you quit beating about the bush and tell me why you're wasting my time.'

'How long are you going to stay here?'

'As long as it suits me. Anything else you want to know?'

'Why have you come here?'

The frown on Biggles's face deepened. 'What the hell's that got to do with you? You must have an almighty nerve to ask such a question.'

'I really came to tell you something.'

'I'm listening.'

'If you're waiting for Captain Macdonald you're likely to be here for some time.'

'Who says so?'

'I do.'

'How is it you know so much?'

'When I was in Mergui I heard he'd been caught running opium. That's a serious matter.'

‘Now suppose we have the truth. When you were in Mergui you met the dirty little stinker Yomas and bribed him to frame Macdonald to keep his ship there.’

‘Captain Yomas is a government official.’

‘Don’t make me laugh,’ sneered Biggles. ‘When I report to Rangoon the sort of racket he runs they’ll have his hide off—and yours, for bribery and corruption. Tell him that when you see him. Now, if you’ve finished, push off and let me get on with my work.’

‘What work?’

‘Getting rid of some of the snakes that infest the islands. There are too many.’

Feng’s lips curled. ‘You don’t like snakes?’

‘Not your sort.’

Feng did not answer. His expression changed suddenly as his eyes came to rest on something that lay on the ground nearer the tent. It was the lifebuoy. He pointed to it. ‘Where did you find that?’

‘On the beach. It must have been thrown up by the storm. If it’s of any use to you you’re welcome to it. We don’t carry lifebuoys.’

‘No. I don’t want it,’ returned Feng slowly.

‘Then perhaps you won’t mind finding a beach of your own. There are plenty to choose from.’

Feng nodded. ‘I’ll do that.’ He turned away, and escorted by his men returned to the dinghy, which was soon on its way back to the junk.

Biggles, a faint smile on his face, lit a cigarette. ‘So now we know,’ he said quietly. ‘Our little trick worked. When Feng spotted the lifebuoy he was so taken by surprise that his face gave him away. He knows that the ship carrying the sovereigns was the *Vagabond*; and now we know he knows. Now he’ll concentrate his efforts on this particular island. That suits us, because we shan’t be here. There’s no point in hanging about here now we know Mac is tied up at Mergui.’

‘How did Feng find out about the *Vagabond*?’ Ginger asked the question.

‘By making inquiries at Singapore, I imagine, after he’d seen Mac’s sovereigns. Quite a few people must have known, at the time, about the gold being loaded on the *Vagabond*; but in the panic to get away they wouldn’t pay much attention to it. No doubt most of them would soon forget all about it. If Feng went along the waterfront checking on British ships that were in the harbour he’d almost certainly find someone who’d remember the business. But never mind how he found out. The point is, we can be pretty sure now of what Feng is after. How much he has told Yomas we don’t know, but it looks as if they’re both in this together. For how long? If it so happened that they found the gold they wouldn’t stop at double-crossing each other. Take it from me, there’d be murder done.’

‘But look here, old boy, this is all very fine,’ said Bertie. ‘What are we going to do about Mac? Through helping us he’s got himself in the dog-

house.'

Biggles didn't answer the question. He turned to Laon. 'When did you leave Mergui?'

'Yesterday morning, Tuan.'

'Was Captain Yomas in the town then?'

'No. I saw his boat leave. Not see it come back.'

'You don't know where he went?'

'No. He goes north. Perhaps to Tavoy. He has office there.'

'Now you've done what you were sent to do, would you like to go back to Mergui?'

'Yes, Tuan.'

'Good. I will take you there in my plane.'

Ginger looked surprised. 'Isn't that like jumping into the lion's den? What can we do when we get there?'

'Get Mac out of gaol.'

'But how?'

'I don't know—yet. We'll see how the land lies. First we'll try fair means. If that fails it'll have to be by—well, other means. All I know is I'm not leaving a friend to rot in a stinking, bug-ridden bungalow, because if I know anything that's what the gaol will be; something intended for native drunks. If all else fails it'll mean a trip to Singapore to let the *Alora*'s owners know what's happened. They won't want their ship laid up; nor will the village people along the coast who depend on it for supplies.'

'But surely Mac would send his owners a telegram telling them what had happened.'

'No doubt he'd try; and no doubt Yomas would see the telegram wasn't sent.'

'Could Yomas stop it?'

'If he can prevent the *Alora* from sailing he'd think nothing of stopping a telegram. These little tin gods have a lot of power locally. Everyone is scared stiff of 'em. You're in Burma, not London. But there is this about it. In these parts a little money goes a long way.'

'If Yomas has gone why does the *Alora* stay in Mergui, anyway?'

'Use your head. How could it sail without Mac? He's probably the only navigator on board. But that's enough talking. Let's get to Mergui and sort things out. Apart from anything else, as Mac can't get here, we shall have to stock up with stores somewhere. Now let's pack up and pull out. Feng can have the run of the island. After seeing that lifebuoy he must be all agog to get here.'

'Let's hope he meets the tiger when it's hungry,' growled Bertie.

CHAPTER 11

WHAT HAPPENED AT MERGUI

It was evening when the *Gadfly* glided quietly into the little bay on the shore of which the town of Mergui huddled under a fringe of tall, slender palms. The *Alora*, at anchor, a wisp of smoke hanging over its single funnel, was conspicuous, there being nothing else of that size. The only other craft were three Chinese sampans and a number of native canoes, some resting motionless on the tranquil water, others pulled up on a muddy beach. The coastguard launch was not there; at least, Ginger said he couldn't see it.

In the mellow light of the setting sun it all made a picturesque scene, although compared with what it had been in the past, when it was the capital of a Siamese province, there was not much of it; and the buildings that could be seen, all of wooden construction, appeared to be in poor shape. Most of them lined the waterfront, some standing on stilts in the sea. On the rising ground behind, the graceful spire of a pagoda, catching the last rays of the sun, proclaimed Buddhist influence. At one end some jungle-covered mounds marked the sites of long-abandoned tin mines.

Mergui was of course on the same coast as Victoria Point, where contact had been made with Captain Macdonald, but in character it was different. Mergui was definitely Burmese and had nothing of the bustling activity of the port farther south. A few men stood in front of some dilapidated warehouses, presumably traders in local produce.

'It'll be dark in half an hour, so we haven't much time,' remarked Biggles to Ginger, after the aircraft had landed on the water and run in close at the quiet end of the foreshore. 'I must have a word with Chintoo and Laon. We mustn't forget their homes are on the coast and it wouldn't be fair to involve them in trouble.'

'Are you expecting trouble?'

'I'm not leaving here until I've seen Mac, so your guess is as good as mine. Wait here.' Biggles went through into the cabin.

In less than five minutes he was back. 'That's settled that,' he said. 'I put the position to them fairly, pointing out it was up to them to decide whether they stayed with us or went off on their own. I warned them what I was going to do and would stand for no nonsense from anyone. We got Mac into this spot and we must get him out. They'll go along with us. When we leave here Laon will rejoin the *Alora*. It's his home. Chintoo says he'll stick with us for as long as we want him. They both know their way round, so that suits us.'

Bertie had come to the bulkhead door and was listening. 'What's the first move?' he inquired.

'That's the big question,' replied Biggles. 'The most important thing is to see Mac to find out exactly how he's fixed: but before tackling the police-

station, it would be a good thing to know if he managed to get a telegram off to his owners in Singapore. If he did, we might do more harm than good by using force at this stage. The only place where we can get that information is at the post-office. I'm confident the first thing Mac would do when he realized what he was up against would be to let his owners know. That would be the correct procedure. But as I said before, Yomas would almost certainly try to prevent that, particularly if he is over-stepping his authority in doing what he has done.'

'How could he prevent it? He doesn't own the bally post-office.'

'Maybe not, but he has some power. Anyhow, I'm going to find out. When we know the facts, one way or the other, we shall know how to act. Let's get on with it.'

Arrangements were soon made. Taking with him Bertie and Laon, leaving Ginger and Chintoo in charge of the aircraft, Biggles went ashore. Laon, knowing what he had to do, led the way to the post-office, taking an alley behind the front row of houses to avoid being seen. The only people they met were two Burmese women who took no notice of them.

It was only a short walk to their destination, but by the time they had reached it the tropic night, soft and warm, bringing with it aromatic perfumes, was dropping from the sky. Fireflies emerged from their daylight retreats to dance under the palms. The humming and chirping of insects made an unbroken background of sound. The moon had not yet appeared, but the stars were so bright, and appeared to hang so low, that it seemed possible to reach them.

The post-office, in front of which Laon had stopped, turned out to be a wooden two-roomed bungalow in such a state of disrepair that it looked as if a shove would push it over. A faded notice on the door, in several languages—including English—announced its purpose, and the hours of business. A light came from a window.

'Good. It's still open,' said Biggles.

He tried the door. It was locked. He knocked. There was no answer. He looked through the lighted window. A small Asiatic, in pyjamas, using chopsticks, was seated at a table eating from a bowl. The light came from an oil lamp on the same table.

Said Biggles: 'According to the notice, the office should be open. Laon, tell him to open the door.'

Laon tried several languages without result.

Biggles rapped on the window with his knuckles. 'Open the door,' he ordered crisply.

This produced an answer. It was: 'Go away. Office shut.'

Biggles drew a deep breath. 'Who does he think he is?' Raising his voice he said: 'If this door isn't open in five seconds I shall kick it down.'

The Chinaman, if he was Chinese, continued eating. He did not even look up.

Biggles's lips set in a hard line. 'It's time someone taught this fellow a lesson,' he muttered. He went to the door and raising a leg kicked from the thigh. The door crashed inwards.

The post-office clerk leapt to his feet and came forward, gesticulating and gabbling in a high piping voice. Biggles met him half-way, seized him by the collar of his pyjama jacket and twisting it tight forced him back against the table. 'I have a good mind to strangle you,' he rasped.

The man gurgled. His eyes bulged. His arms waved helplessly.

Biggles went on. 'Now you answer my questions and tell the truth, or I'll give you a hiding you'll never forget.' He loosened his grip a trifle. 'Are you in charge of the post-office?'

The man gasped. 'Yes, sir.'

'That's better. You know Captain Macdonald?'

'Yes.'

'Has he sent a telegram from here?'

The man looked terrified. He did not answer.

Biggles gave the collar another twist. 'Did you send a telegram for Captain Macdonald? Speak up.'

'Yes—no.'

'Which is it? Yes or No?'

'No.'

'But he brought one in?'

'Yes.'

'But you didn't send it?'

'No.'

'Why not?'

'Captain Yomas says not.'

'Ah. Where is the telegram?' Biggles released his hold.

The man went to a heap of papers, selected one, and with a shaking hand gave it to Biggles who, after a glance, folded it and put it in his pocket. He then eyed the man sternly. 'Now listen carefully. You will forget that I've been here and that you gave me this paper. I don't care what lies you tell Captain Yomas. Stay indoors for the next hour. You understand?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Good. Here, take this and keep your mouth shut.' Biggles peeled a few notes from his wad and handed them over. 'If you tell Captain Yomas what you've done he'll kill you; and if he doesn't I will. That's all. Don't do anything to bring me back here.' With that he led the way outside.

'You see what I mean?' he said to Bertie. 'I was sorry for the poor little devil, but there's only one way to get the truth out of his sort. You have to be tough.'

'Jolly good, old boy. Where now?'

'To the police-station. It's vital that we let Mac know his telegram wasn't dispatched. He's probably content to stay here only because he's relying on

his owners to act. As things are he'd have to wait a long while. Now Laon, the police-station. You know the way. Lead on.'

The police-station turned out to be an improvement on the post-office, at all events in the matter of size and a corrugated iron roof instead of palm thatch. Of the same rough timber construction, it was long and narrow, in the manner of the traditional British army hut, with a single door at one end. This opened into a narrow corridor that ran the length of the building. From it a number of doors at regular intervals gave access to the prison cells, although presently it was discovered that the first compartment provided accommodation for the guard on duty.

Investigation revealed only one guard, a short man in a drab cotton uniform with the jacket unbuttoned. He sat outside, in an attitude of careless ease, legs wide apart, in a chair tilted back so that it rested on the wooden wall. A long cheroot hung from his lips. Near at hand leaned a rifle. Against the hut had been tossed a cartridge bandolier. It was obvious that the very last thing the man expected was that he might be called upon to use the weapon. It would not be fair to criticize him too hardly for this, for in tropical countries it becomes a habit to do any task with the least possible effort. The only movement he made when the visitors came to a halt in front of him, to show that he was aware of it, was to move the cheroot a few inches from his mouth and exhale a cloud of smoke.

Bertie moved nonchalantly close to the rifle.

Biggles spoke. In a casual tone of voice, as if the request was not unusual, he said: 'I want to see one of your prisoners—Captain Macdonald.'

'No see,' was the equally casual answer.

'You heard what I said,' returned Biggles, his voice hardening slightly.

'No see.'

'Yes see,' corrected Biggles succinctly. 'Do you take me to him or do I have to find him myself?'

There must have been a threatening note in this question, for the guard allowed his chair to tilt upright. At the same time he reached out for his rifle, but the fingers that closed round it first were Bertie's. He moved it along the wall a little way.

'Don't be stupid,' went on Biggles. 'There's no need for us to fight about this. If it comes to that you'll be the one to get hurt.' He took out his wad of notes and held it suggestively.

'I get plenty trouble,' grumbled the guard, obviously torn between fear and the temptation to make some easy money.

Holding the notes in his left hand, Biggles took out his automatic with the other. 'Which is it to be?' he asked evenly.

The man hesitated only for a few seconds. He made a quick reconnaissance of the road, such as it was. There was no one in sight. He held out a hand towards the notes.

Biggles flipped off several and gave them to him. 'Bring Captain to me

here,' he ordered. 'Go with him, Laon.'

The guard took a bunch of keys from his pocket and followed by Laon went inside.

While they waited Biggles said to Bertie: 'Governments that underpay their employees deserve the sort of untrustworthy servants they usually get. Men like this wretched fellow will nearly always take a bribe; so probably would we if we had to live on his pay. I don't like bribery, but there are occasions when, if it will save violence, it's the easier way to get what you want.'

The guard, and Laon returned, bringing Mac with them.

'Losh, mon, but I'm glad to see you,' said the Scot.

'Thanks for sending Laon over to let us know what was going on,' answered Biggles. 'We haven't any time to waste, so let's talk fast. Tell me, do you want to stay here?'

'Of course I don't, but rather than get wrong with the Burmese Government I thought I'd better stick it out until my owners got in touch with Rangoon and settled this daft business.'

'Your owners know nothing about it.'

'I sent them a telegram.'

'It was never dispatched.'

'Why not?'

'Yomas stopped it. Here it is. I thought that might happen, so I called at the post-office on my way here and frightened the truth out of the clerk.'

Mac swore.

'If you're not to be stuck here indefinitely you'll have to get away under your own steam,' Biggles told him. 'That's how it is. What are you going to do?'

'If I break gaol I'll never again be allowed to trade along the coast.'

'And if you stay here, and that crook Yomas gets a conviction against you on this trumped-up charge of smuggling, you'll be finished here anyway; so I don't see what you have to lose by pulling up the *Alora's* mudhook and slipping away while the going's good. Yomas isn't here, but I don't know how soon he'll be back.'

'I see what you mean,' said Mac thoughtfully.

'I'm sorry about this. I'm afraid I'm to blame.'

'How do you make that out? Yomas has had it in for me for some time.'

'But he wouldn't have dared to go as far as this but for your association with me. He's not really concerned with you. It's me he's after. He must have found out that the stores you were buying were for me. By putting you under arrest he thinks he's cut my supply line.'

'But what's the idea. What's he got against you?'

'I'll put it in a nutshell. Feng, the man who saw you find the sovereigns, is here, with a junk, looking for the rest. He knows why I'm here. It's the only explanation of his behaviour. I'm pretty sure he's found out that the

sovereigns were put aboard the *Vagabond* and that she was lost in these waters. We've already clashed with him. He wants us out of the way. He's got Yomas on his side, but how far he's taken him into his confidence I don't know.'

'So that's the way the wind blows,' muttered Mac. 'What are you going to do?'

'I shall carry on. Don't worry about us. We shall manage. It's you I'm worried about. After this I don't expect you to unload the stores on Chang Island as we arranged. Feng is there now, so I shan't be going back, anyway. When I leave here I shall make for Kampong Island, our other rendezvous.'

'I'd just come from there when this happened. You'll find your stores in the sand under the last hut at the western end. It includes six jerricans of petrol.'

'Capital. That's grand news.'

'I've also got aboard the *Alora* the stuff intended for Chang Island. I bought some of it here. As it included things I don't usually carry, Yomas must have guessed who it was for. What shall I do with it?'

'I'll take it off you—or as much as I can carry. But what are you going to do?'

'What would you suggest?'

'Yomas is away somewhere to the north. Why not pull out while you have the chance? I imagine Yomas's launch is faster than the *Alora*, but reckoning on you getting a start of at least some hours, you should be off Penang before he catches up with you. You'd be out of Burmese territory, so the *Alora* would be safe. From Penang you could get in touch with your owners in Singapore. If you'd rather leave the *Alora* here I could fly you down to Penang.'

'I'll no' leave my ship.'

'That's up to you.'

'I'll get her away before Yomas thinks up some more devilment,' decided Mac.

'Fair enough. Laon tells me your dinghy is still on the beach. He can row you out and stay with you. I shan't want him again. Better still, he can tow my aircraft over to the *Alora*, so that I can take those stores off you without having to start my engines. The less noise we make the better.'

'That suits me. What are we going to do about this fellow?' Mac jerked a thumb in the direction of the guard.

'I'll lock him inside his own gaol. I don't think he'll make a fuss. He might find it hard to explain how he got the money in his pocket.'

When Biggles took the keys, and the man realized what was intended, he protested, but it was only a half-hearted demonstration and at the finish he accepted his predicament with oriental resignation. The keys were left in the outside door.

On the way to the beach Biggles said: 'There's something you can tell me,

Mac. On Chang Island we found one of the *Vagabond*'s lifebuoys. It had been thrown high and dry by a storm at some time. We couldn't find a wreck, so I can only conclude it drifted in to where we found it. Do you happen to know from which direction the currents run to Chang Island?"

'The general flow all through the islands is from the north. The seas swing round the Bay of Bengal; when they hit land they come straight down the Malay Peninsula.'

'Would Kampong Island be on that line?'

'Bound to be.'

'Fine. That's just what I wanted to know. I hoped the lifebuoy would give us a clue.'

They reached the waterfront. A full moon was rising out of the sea like a gigantic silver balloon, throwing a flare-path of what looked like molten metal across the face of the water. A few people could be seen moving in the distance, but the beach was deserted. Laon launched the dinghy.

'There's going to be a fine old stink about this,' predicted Mac gloomily.

'Forget it,' advised Biggles. 'I'd wager the Burmese Government knows nothing about your arrest. Yomas won't talk about it. He may be an official, but at the moment he's trying to get some money for himself. You get away and argue about it later.'

Mac said: 'Laon can take me out to my ship. It may take a little while to raise steam. You get along to your plane. When I'm aboard Laon will come over and give you a tow. While I'm getting up steam you can take in the stores I've got for you.'

'That seems to be the thing to do,' agreed Biggles.

So they parted, Mac and Laon in the dinghy making for the *Alora*, Biggles and Bertie walking along the beach towards the aircraft. Coming opposite they waded out and, joining Ginger and Chintoo in the cabin, narrated briefly what had happened and explained the present plan.

Presently Laon arrived in the dinghy. Ginger pulled in the light anchor that had been dropped to keep the aircraft steady and made fast the tow line. Chintoo got into the dinghy with Laon to take an oar and the *Gadfly* began a slow journey across the bay to where the *Alora* lay with a column of smoke rising from her funnel.

Mac was waiting with the stores ready to be handed down. By the time the several items had been transferred to the aircraft the beat of the ship's engine announced her readiness to move off. The chain rattled as the anchor was weighed. The dinghy was hauled aboard. Mac's head appeared above the rail.

'Right,' he called. 'Where shall I see you?'

Biggles answered. 'I shall go to Kampong Island, but if I run short of petrol I shall have to run down to Penang. If you haven't left I'll see you there.'

Mac waved acknowledgment. 'Fine. Stand clear. I'm awa'.'

The aircraft was pushed out of danger. Aboard the *Alora* the engine room

bell clanged. Her propeller churned, and the *Gadfly* rocked gently in her wake as, showing no light, she moved slowly towards the open sea.

‘Well, we’ve done what we came to do,’ said Biggles, as those in the aircraft watched her go, leaving a trail of liquid silver as moonlight played on the disturbed water.

‘And where do we go from here?’ inquired Ginger. ‘If it’s Kampong Island we may burn a lot of petrol trying to find it in the dark, even with a moon.’

‘I shan’t attempt it,’ answered Biggles. ‘We can afford to sit here and think it over. A cup of coffee and a bite to eat seems indicated.’

‘Shall we be all right here?’ questioned Bertie dubiously. ‘I mean to say, in all this bally moonlight we must be as conspicuous as a swan on a duckpond.’

‘What else can we do? I don’t like it any more than you do, but where else can we go? There’s no cover anywhere. Moreover, if we start up we shall attract the attention of everyone on the waterfront. I don’t feel like spending the night on the open sea, anyway. I don’t think anyone is likely to interfere with us or it would have happened already. Still, we’d better mount a guard in case a *kabang* or a sampan comes along without looking where it’s going. We don’t want anyone barging into us.’

‘At the present rate of progress we’re going to be an awful long time finding those perishing sovereigns,’ prophesied Ginger lugubriously.

‘We’ll get cracking tomorrow,’ promised Biggles. ‘You might drop the anchor. We don’t want to wake up and find ourselves stuck in the mud somewhere on the beach.’

CHAPTER 12

YOMAS TRIES AGAIN

Ginger, asleep on the cabin floor with one of the recently loaded bags of rice for a pillow, was awakened by the murmur of voices near at hand. As full consciousness banished sleep he raised himself on an elbow to listen. The gibberish of an unknown language floated in through portholes blue with moonlight. He looked at the watch on his wrist. Half past three. Chintoo would be on guard duty. He was talking. To whom? Apparently it was some person known to him or he would have raised an alarm.

Actuated more by curiosity than anxiety Ginger got up. Stepping between the recumbent figures of Biggles and Bertie, he went forward to the bulkhead door which had been left open to let in some air, for the humid heat thrown off by the sun-soaked water, absorbed during the day, was stifling. In the cockpit he found Chintoo talking to someone over the side. A bamboo mast and a foul smell of bilge and rotten fish told him a *kabang* was alongside.

‘Who is it?’ he asked.

‘The Salones who took Laon to Chang Island, Tuan.’

‘What are they doing here?’

‘They have just got back. Seeing the plane they came to ask if Laon is here with us.’

‘They have been a long time.’

‘The sails of their boats are no use unless the wind is dead behind.’

‘Why are they here? Why haven’t they gone back to their tribe?’

‘They have come for their wives,’ Chintoo explained. ‘These men find a pearl. They came here to sell it. Their wives came with them to spend the money on things they need. No doubt they were cheated. They do not understand money. Laon must have paid them well to take him to Chang Island. Now they find their wives. Then they will go back to their people.’

Biggles’s voice came from the cabin. ‘What’s going on?’

‘It’s the Salones who took Laon to Chang Island. They’ve just got back.’

‘Don’t let them go. I want to talk to them.’

Biggles appeared, shirt open, hair tousled. To Chintoo he said: ‘Ask them where they last saw that junk.’

Chintoo put the question. ‘It went to Chang Island and anchored off the beach.’

‘Ah! That’s what I expected. Now ask the Salones where their main party is now.’

‘Their people are at King Island.’

‘Is that anywhere near Kampong Island?’

‘Not far away.’

‘Do they know of any wrecked ships at the northern end of the islands?’

It took some time to get an answer to the question, the Salones discussing it between themselves. 'They say there are many wrecks, some very old,' informed Chintoo at last.

'Any wooden ships? Iron ones are no use.'

Another delay. Yes, there were some wooden ships. They knew of two on Elephant Island, one on Shark Island and one on the rocks at Kampong.

'I suppose it's no use asking them for details,' Biggles said to Ginger in an aside. 'But it's something to know there are wrecks there. I can't think of anything else to ask them. All right, Chintoo. Would they like some cigarettes?'

'Yes, Tuan.'

'Fetch half a dozen packets,' Biggles told Ginger.

While he waited Chintoo went on talking to the Salones. He looked at Biggles. 'They say not land on Shark Island, which is very close to Kampong.'

'Why not?'

'They say there is a man there who shoots at anyone who lands.'

'Why?'

'He is mad.'

'Is he white, brown, yellow...?'

'Brown they think. They are not sure.'

'That's a new angle,' said Ginger, who had returned with the cigarettes in time to hear this conversation. 'Tigers, crocodiles, snakes, now a lunatic. We shall soon have had the lot.'

Biggles handed the cigarettes to Chintoo, who passed them on. The Salones then went on towards the beach. Ginger was not sorry to see them go. The smell of their boat nearly made him sick.

'Now we see the advantage of having an interpreter with us,' said Biggles. 'How right Mac was. Without Chintoo we'd have missed an interesting piece of information.'

'About a maniac on Shark Island? Jolly good.' Bertie spoke.

'There's more to it than that. According to Mac the dead Salone he found, wearing the sovereigns, had been shot. That's been a puzzle to me all along. Who would shoot a Salone, and why? Except on the rare occasions when they find a pearl, they're not worth a bad penny between 'em.'

'What you mean is, the Salone may have been shot by this alleged lunatic on Shark Island.'

'That's the thought that occurred to me. Anyway, it's useful to know that if we set foot on Shark Island we're liable to be shot.'

'Do you believe this?'

Biggles shrugged. 'It sounds a bit far-fetched, but the Salones should know. Why make up such a tale?' He looked at his watch. 'Half past four. I don't think it's worth while trying to get any more sleep. I'm wide awake for the day. It'll be light by six. By the time we've had a wash and some breakfast

we might move off to locate Kampong Island. With stores there, and some on board, the only thing we're likely to be short of is petrol.'

'Tell me something, old boy,' requested Bertie. 'According to these Salone lads there's a wreck of a wooden ship on Shark Island.'

'What of it?'

'If all else fails I imagine we shall go to have a dekko at it.'

'Well?'

'How do we find out if there really is a crazy bloke there? I mean to say, do we just toddle ashore and let him have first crack at us?'

'I wish you wouldn't choose awkward moments to ask awkward questions,' remonstrated Biggles. 'Let's take one thing at a time. How we tackle Shark Island, should we find it necessary to go there, will depend largely on the size of the place, and—'

'Just a minute,' cut in Ginger, cocking an ear as the saying is. 'Listen. Can you hear what I can hear?'

Through the silence that followed, from some distance away beyond the curve of the bay, came the exhaust noise of a motor.

'That's an oil engine,' declared Ginger. 'I haven't noticed many craft in these parts equipped with' them. But I remember one. Yomas. Could he be coming back?'

Biggles frowned, eyes probing the direction from which the sound was coming. 'I suppose it could be, although I didn't reckon on it so soon. But on this jaunt it doesn't do to reckon on anything. If it is Yomas the first thing he'll see is that the *Alora* has gone. That won't improve his temper. He'll also see us and guess who was responsible. We don't want any more trouble with him if it can be avoided, but if he catches us here there's likely to be plenty. We'd better be ready to move fast. Ginger, get the anchor in.' So saying Biggles dropped into his seat with his hands on the controls.

In a matter of minutes a launch, white in the moonlight, had rounded the point and turned into the bay.

'It's Yomas,' muttered Biggles. 'Confound the fellow. Why did he have to choose this moment to come back? He's seen us, too,' he went on, as the launch altered course a trifle to head straight for the aircraft. 'I don't think we'll wait for him.' His left hand moved to start the engines, but to the surprise of everyone the vessel suddenly swung round and made for the shore.

'He's changed his mind,' said Bertie.

'It won't be for long if I know anything,' returned Biggles grimly. 'He'll change it again when he finds out what has happened at the police-station. I'd say that's where he's going now, to check if Mac is still here.'

'He'll be hopping mad when he finds he isn't,' asserted Bertie cheerfully.

'We'd better not laugh too soon,' said Biggles seriously. 'He may have a card up his sleeve. Keep your eyes open for the next move.'

'What's wrong with getting away now?' urged Ginger.

'I don't want to waste petrol looking for Kampong Island in the dark. It'll

start to get light presently, so the longer we can hang on here the better. Besides, I'd like to see what Yomas does about this.'

Time passed. Ten minutes—twenty minutes—half an hour. The pale, deceptive light of the false dawn crept over the mountains of Siam that formed the backbone of the Peninsula.

'It looks as if he isn't going to do anything,' remarked Ginger.

'I wouldn't care to bet on that,' answered Biggles soberly. 'When he finds Mac has gone he'll be in a mood for murder. Everyone in the town will hear about it; which means Yomas will lose face, as they call it; and as I said once before, in Asia that hurts more than a kick in the pants.'

'Something seems to be happening on the beach,' observed Bertie. 'I can see people moving about. They seem to be mustering the canoes.'

'I wonder could that be it?' said Biggles pensively.

'Could be what?'

'If he got a lot of small craft round us, or between us and the sea, he'd have us in a trap. We couldn't risk a collision even with a canoe.'

'I think you're right,' said Ginger. 'The canoes are coming out, but they're not coming straight towards us.'

'He may think by that he's fooling us. He's started his engine. That means he's coming out himself in the launch. I think that's all we need to know. We'd better get weaving.'

The *Gadfly's* engines started at the first time of asking. Biggles gave them just enough throttle to get the aircraft moving. In the circumstances it seemed sufficient to keep the machine well ahead of the flotilla of small craft, now clearly to be seen as they left the dim shore line for the moonlit water of the open bay.

Then it happened. In a flash the situation changed, and what changed it was the staccato chatter of a machine-gun. Bullets cut flecks of quicksilver from the surface of the limpid water uncomfortably close to the already racing aircraft, Biggles having opened up at the first shot. There were a few nasty seconds until it unstuck, but once airborne in a climbing turn the risk of being hit was negligible.

'The devil,' raged Biggles to Ginger, who was in the seat beside him. 'Who would have thought he had a machine-gun on board? By thunder! He nearly caught us napping. Oh for one little bomb, one nice little twenty-pounder. I'd give him something to go on with. Our chance may come.'

The aircraft bored its way, climbing steeply, into the starry sky, heading north. At two thousand feet it caught the rays of the rising sun to become a spark of fire in a world of its own. Below, night still had possession of the land as if reluctant to release it. The islands lay like carelessly dropped blobs of ink.

Ginger touched Biggles on the arm and pointed to one on which an orange point of light was conspicuous, the only sign of human occupation to be seen. 'That must be the main party of Salones on King Island,' he said.

‘Good,’ answered Biggles. ‘That should give us our bearings. Check with the chart in the cabin and give me a course for Kampong Island.’

Ginger went aft.

When he returned some minutes later the new day had broken and the islands lay like a string of emeralds under a sky of lapis lazuli. He looked at the compass. ‘You’re all right,’ he said. ‘Keep her as she goes. I make the distance thirty miles.’

‘In that case I can afford to lose height and save petrol,’ answered Biggles, easing the throttle back a little. ‘I’ve been trying to remember exactly what questions we asked those two Salones at Mergui. I’m also wondering how much Chintoo said when he was speaking to them in their own language. In other words, how much do the Salones know about our proposed movements?’

‘Does it matter now we’re away?’

‘It could, unless the Salones left Mergui when we did. If anyone ashore noticed the kabang alongside our machine, Yomas, in the inquiries he’s bound to make, will get to hear of it. He’ll get out of the Salones everything they know. He’ll be spitting venom like the snake he is, but unless he knows where we are I can’t see there’s much he can do. On the other hand, if he gets an inkling of where we’re making for he’ll be after us.’

‘Some islands were mentioned—when we asked about the wrecks of wooden ships,’ replied Ginger reflectively. ‘Elephant Island, Shark Island and Kampong were three of them.’

‘Hm. Pity about that. I’d have been more careful had I known Yomas was likely to be back so soon. Well, one can’t think of everything. We shall have to take our chance. There’s nothing we can do about it now.’

‘Yomas will guess why we’re interested only in the wrecks of wooden ships.’

‘Of course he will. We shall have to keep an eye open for him. There is this about it; from the air we should be able to see him before he gets close to us.’

‘That looks like Kampong ahead,’ observed Ginger, changing the subject. ‘It looks about the right size and the right shape.’

‘The remains of the Malay settlement will tell us if we’ve come to the right place.’ Biggles cut the engines and began a long glide.

‘I think I can see the ruins from here,’ said Ginger, two or three minutes later. ‘Close to the jungle at the far end of the beach.’

‘There’s plenty of beach, anyway, that’s one good thing.’

‘Will you pitch the tent there?’

‘Why not? We shall have to make camp somewhere and the nearer we are to Mac’s stores the better.’

Again Ginger studied the chart. ‘That must be Shark Island we’re passing now,’ he observed. ‘The Salones said it was close to Kampong and it certainly is. The two islands can’t be more than a mile apart.’

‘We’ll deal with Kampong first. If we draw blank there we’ll hop across to Shark Island.’

‘You’re not forgetting there’s a lunatic there with a gun.’

‘I’ll give more thought to him when I’m satisfied he’s really there,’ rejoined Biggles. ‘For the moment I’m more concerned with some breakfast.’

Before landing Biggles made a coastal tour of the island from an altitude of about a hundred feet, an operation which, involving a distance of perhaps ten miles, occupied no more than five minutes.

In general it differed little from others of similar size. There was no really high ground, possibly one of the reasons why an attempt had been made to develop it, and the shore line was rather less indented than the majority. It flattened out at one end, stumps of trees showing where the big timber had been cut to open an area for cultivation, but coarse grass and palmetto scrub had again taken possession of the site.

There was only one good beach. It was on the eastern side of the island, sandy, with a few scattered rocks, as usual backing a bay about a quarter of a mile long. The upper part appeared not to be reached by normal tides. At present the tide was out, and Ginger, surveying the coast, thought it would be possible in these conditions to walk long distances, over the rocks or between them. There were places where the jungle ran right down to the sea; but there were no mangroves.

On the western side of the island, however, facing the open ocean, he noted a sandy cove hardly large enough to be called a beach. It was more sheltered than the bay and he memorized its position for a bad weather anchorage. Most of the island was blanketed by the usual jungle. There were not many big trees near the beach; they must, he surmised, have been felled to build the cluster of houses, now in the last stages of dilapidation, which could be seen tucked in a corner at the northern end of the beach. The only sign of life was a small herd of wild pigs rooting on the low ground.

According to the Salones there was the wreck of a wooden ship on the island, but Ginger was unable to spot it.

Following the customary routine Biggles made a trial run, looking for possible obstructions, before landing on the clear, shallow water, near the beach. Then, lowering the wheels, he taxied on up the sand, to a point above the tide line, within easy reach of the abandoned *kampong* from which the island took its name. During this operation nobody spoke, aware that the slightest mishap could have serious consequences, one of them being they might find themselves marooned.

‘Well, here we are,’ said Biggles, lighting a cigarette as, having got out of the aircraft, they surveyed their surroundings. ‘I think before we unload, while Chintoo is getting a fire going for coffee, we should locate Mac’s stores. He said he’d put in half a dozen jerricans of petrol. We’ll get that in the main tank right away. It should see us through what we have to do here. If we find nothing in a couple of days I shall have to go to Penang to fill up and report to

the Chief for instructions. Hunting a parcel of sovereigns among all these islands may look a simple job on paper, but we can now judge what it really means. Fortunately the distances we have to fly are short, otherwise, without servicing facilities, the thing would be hopeless. Well, let's get on with it. When we know the stores are here we'll make camp. Then, with nearly a full day in front of us we'll make a start on Kampong.'

Ginger was already strolling towards the nearest of the houses, a primitive affair of rough timber and palm thatch. He had nearly reached the door when with a crash and a snort a buffalo bull dashed out. It did not stop, but galloped on along the beach, tail up, horns weaving, presently to charge into the jungle where it disappeared.

Ginger, who had gone over backwards on the loose dry sand in the shock of the beast's first rush, slowly picked himself up, looking anything but pleased. With danger past everyone was laughing.

'What's so funny?' he inquired sourly.

'You, old boy,' Bertie told him, adjusting his monocle. 'I haven't seen you move so fast in a long time.'

'Who would expect such a brute to be in a house? What was it doing there, anyway?'

'Probably spends the night there to dodge the mosquitoes,' conjectured Biggles. 'Never mind. Life is full of surprises,' he added tritely, as he walked on to the end house. This is where the stuff should be.'

Inside, in a corner, was a pile of recently-cut foliage, fern fronds and the like. On being pulled aside the petrol cans came to light. Under these, protected by an old tarpaulin, were the stores, in tins and wooden boxes.

'Fine,' said Biggles. 'Now we know how we stand.'

CHAPTER 13

THE MYSTERY MAN

A temporary camp was quickly set up, Biggles remarking that in such weather in such a climate there was really no need for a tent; a fire would keep at a distance the buffaloes which, from the marks, were in the habit of standing about in the ruins of the *kampong*. No more stores were unloaded than would be required immediately. Those of the new supply which were in perishable containers were put in the aircraft. The petrol Mac had provided was put into the main tank, the empty cans being returned to the hut in case Mac had promised to return them. Among backward people empty petrol cans have since the war become universal containers.

The main reason why it was not thought necessary to establish a more permanent camp was because it was considered hardly worth while. According to the Salones there was only one wreck on the island, so one or two days at most should be all the time needed to locate it. Moreover, with the exception of the near-by Shark Island there was no other really close, so when this had been explored the *Gadfly*, to save petrol, would have to move nearer to the next group.

While Chintoo was getting a fire going for breakfast, Ginger suggested it might be a good thing if he made a quick examination of the beach above the high-water mark for a little heap of limpet shells. These would be an almost certain indication that the dead Salone had been there. If he had, there was a good chance that it was here he had found the sovereigns.

Biggles agreed, so off Ginger went; but to his disappointment the trip proved fruitless. Apart from the usual crabs and quarrelling monkeys, pig and buffalo tracks, he saw nothing worth a second glance. He returned to report failure and join the others round the first meal of the day.

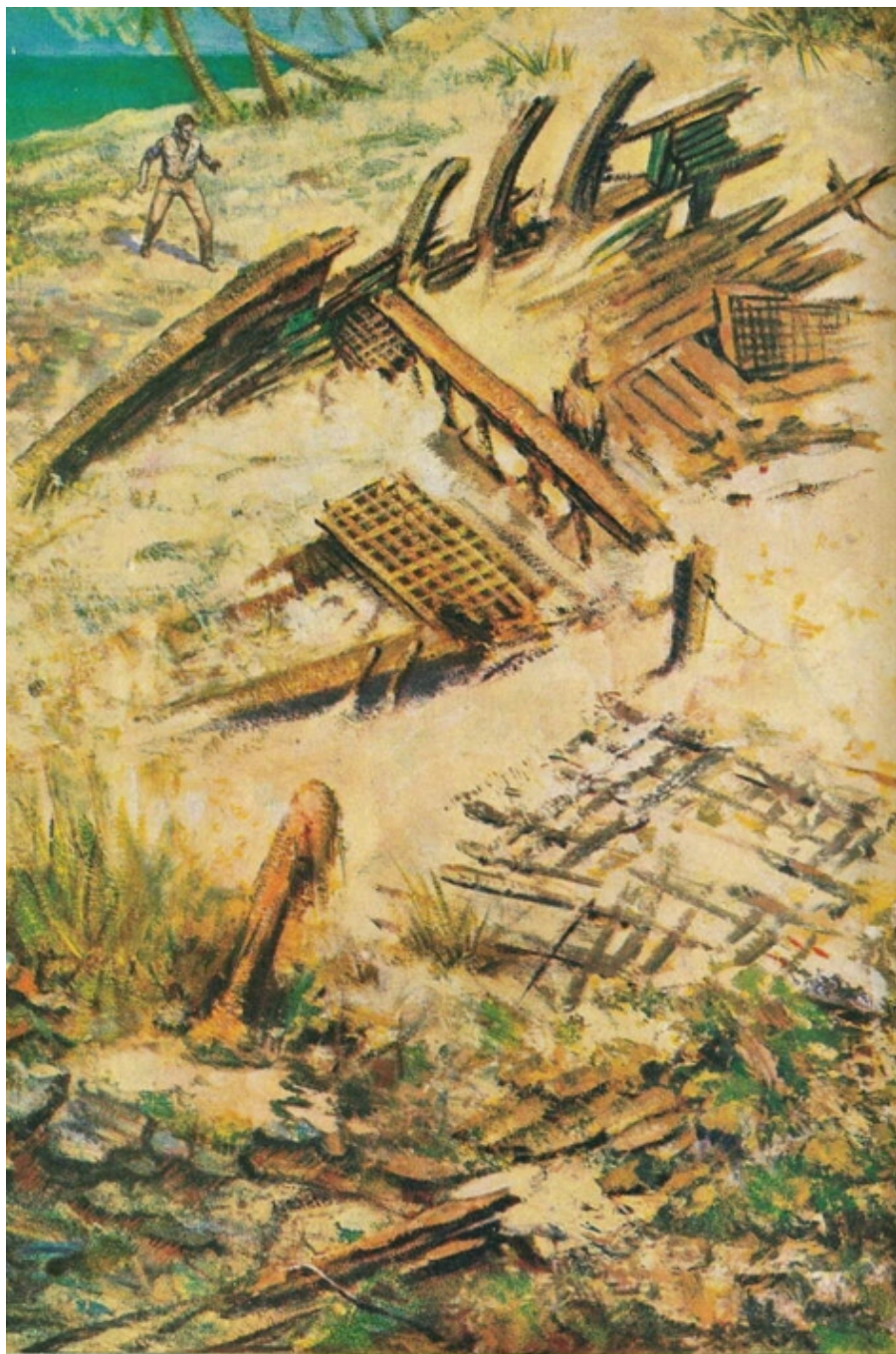
Bertie made a suggestion. 'You know, chaps, I think we could give this place the once-over without using the aircraft. That would save petrol, if you see what I mean. From what I could see from topsides as we came in it looked possible—anyhow when the tide is out—to walk right round the bally place. It shouldn't take more than four or five hours. I had another look just now when I was collecting firewood. I mean to say, if what we're looking for is here it's bound to be on the coast. There wouldn't be much sense in looking for a ship in the middle of the island—if you follow me.'

Biggles said he thought it was a sound idea. Anything to save petrol. They might run into difficult places, but as it was hard to see any serious objection to the plan it could be tried. They had nothing to lose. They could put some biscuits in their pockets for lunch and take a water-bottle in case they failed to find fresh water. 'I can't imagine any harm coming to the machine,' he went on. 'Chintoo can stay here. I doubt if any buffaloes will come near while he's

about. Without someone to keep them off they could be a menace. There's something about paint, and aeroplane dope in particular, that seems to fascinate cattle. They'll stand licking it all day. I've known a cow to lick a hole clean through a wing.'

In a few minutes, taking the rifle in the hope of getting fresh meat for the pot, and leaving Chintoo to take care of things, they set off on what was intended to be a tour of the island. As Bertie remarked, if the Salones were to be believed, and there was no reason to doubt them, on this occasion they did at least have the satisfaction of knowing that somewhere on the foreshore there was the wreck of a wooden ship.

For the most part, with the tide out to expose sand between rocks, the going was fairly easy, although as it was seldom possible to walk in a straight line for any distance, it was clear the mileage they would have to cover would be longer than anticipated. There were places where masses of seaweed-covered boulders, piled one on the other, slowed them down. But on the whole, by pressing on steadily, they made good time, and in two hours, shortly after rounding the end of the island, Bertie, who was leading, let out a cheer when there appeared in front of them the object of their journey. Anyhow it was a wreck. There was not much of it, but sufficient to leave them in no doubt what it was. What could be seen were the bones of a wooden ship; the tips of a double row of seaweed-festooned ribs to which still clung some other timber. They projected from a small open area of sand between jagged outcrops of rock which apparently had ended the career of the vessel.



What could be seen were the bones of a wooden ship (page 156)

They hurried on, and on reaching the objective stopped to survey the picture.

‘She was a wooden ship,’ observed Biggles. This must be the wreck the

Salones had in mind. What we're going to do with it now we've found it I'm dashed if I know.'

'You look disappointed,' said Bertie. 'Isn't this what you expected to find?'

'It certainly is not. For no particular reason, I must admit, I expected to find a more or less recognizable ship, or at least a hull if minus masts and deck gear. This looks as if it might have been here for a hundred years. There are other things I don't like about it. The *Vagabond* was a schooner of ninety tons. I don't pretend to be a judge of marine craft, but I'd have thought this one was a lot bigger than that. I'd say no one has touched this poor old hulk for years. The deck seems to have gone, although I suppose that was inevitable if she's been washed over for years by every tide.'

'If the old Salone came here the next tide would smooth out any signs of digging he left,' Ginger pointed out. 'Whatever was in her hold can't have been washed away.'

'Maybe not; but whatever was under her deck is now covered by what looks like several hundred tons of sand. How are we going to clear it? You tell me.'

No one answered.

Biggles resumed. 'Let's face it. It would take a gang of navvies a week to clear this lot. We haven't any implements for the job even if we felt like tackling it, which frankly I don't. The only tool we have is that fiddling little spade we brought with us to dig holes for the tent poles. Starting with that would be like the kid in the fairy tale trying to empty a lake with a thimble. Maybe I was short-sighted, but I didn't come prepared to excavate a sand-pit.' Biggles lit a cigarette and threw down the dead match stick in disgust.

Bertie came back. 'But look here, old boy. All we want to know is the name of this ship.'

'How do you propose we get it?'

'The name should be on the bows and the stern.'

'I know those are the usual places,' returned Biggles with mild sarcasm. 'Unfortunately this hulk has no bows so that you'd notice them, and what's left of the stern is all glued up in a mass of stinking seaweed, limpets and barnacles. Do you feel like scraping them off?'

'I'm not mad about it,' confessed Bertie.

'You wouldn't find any paint left if you did.'

'I was only trying to be helpful,' protested Bertie.

Biggles nodded. 'I know. But nothing I can think of will help us here. I don't give up easily, but faced with a problem like this I'm prepared to call it a day.'

'Does that mean we're going to do nothing about it?'

'What can we do? Start digging with our paws like a bunch of rabbits? If you can think of anything go ahead; but don't be long about it because the tide's on the turn.'

‘There might be a box of gold right under my feet,’ asserted Bertie.

‘Then haul it out and let’s have fun,’ requested Biggles.

‘No one shall say I didn’t try,’ declared Bertie. He went to the stern where the ribs projected only a few inches, the ship not lying dead level. Dropping on his knees he began scooping away sand with his hands.

Biggles watched sympathetically. Ginger with amusement. ‘If I hadn’t seen this I wouldn’t have believed it,’ he murmured.

Bertie took no notice. He went on digging. He had gone down about eighteen inches when he came to something hard. He rapped on it with his knuckles. It gave back a hollow sound.

‘What is it?’ asked Biggles, now taking an interest.

‘Wood. Must be the deck. Looks pretty rotten.’

‘The hold, or whatever is under it, will be solid with sand.’

‘We’ll jolly soon see about that.’ Bertie got up, found a rock about twice the size of his head and staggered back with it. Raising it high he brought it crashing down on the exposed timber. It disappeared, leaving Bertie staring stupidly at the hole he had made.

The others hurried forward.

‘Stand back,’ ordered Bertie sharply. ‘This is my hole. You make your own.’

‘All right—all right,’ answered Biggles. ‘So it’s your own private hole. What are you going to do with it now you’ve got it?’

Bertie grimaced. ‘I say, there’s a most frightful stink coming up. Absolutely shocking.’

Biggles took a pace nearer. ‘That doesn’t smell like gold to me.’

‘Still, it might be down there.’

‘Not a chance. Only once in my life did I ever smell anything like that. I remember. It was an Arab dhow that had gone ashore on the coast of the Red Sea. It had been loaded with green hides. All you’ll find in festering hides is—well, look for yourself.’

From the hole was emerging a column of fat white worms.

Bertie backed away with a shudder of horror. ‘Oh no!’ he cried plaintively. ‘How perfectly disgusting.’

‘Are you still thinking of going below to look for the gold?’ inquired Biggles, smiling.

‘Don’t be beastly.’

Biggles became serious. ‘Okay,’ he said shortly. ‘Let’s pack it in. This isn’t the *Vagabond*, so there’s no point in wasting any more time here. The Salones said there was one wreck here. This must be it. We needn’t look for any more. Let’s get back to camp. Come on.’

No one argued about this, so they set off on the return journey. With an eye on the incoming tide they travelled faster than on the way out. Seeing they would easily beat the tide, Biggles stopped at some sun-warmed rocks a little short of the beach to munch a biscuit and take a drink of water.

They did not hurry over this, and may have tarried ten minutes while Biggles afterwards smoked a cigarette.

They were about to move on, when from behind the point of jungle-covered land that hid the beach from view there came a sound that for a second stiffened their muscles rigid. Biggles's jaw dropped as he stared unbelievably at the others. Then he ran.

The sound was the *Gadfly*'s engines being started.

Never had Ginger run faster than he did now, yet when he turned the corner to bring the camp in sight Biggles and Bertie were still in front of him. What he saw was the *Gadfly* taxiing towards the sea with Chintoo racing after it, his *parang* in his hand.

Biggles, without a pause, swerved to a line that would cut off the aircraft. He intercepted it at the very edge of the water and grabbing a wing tip swung the machine round so that its course was parallel with, instead of into, the sea. The throttle was advanced but he hung on, yelling: 'Get to the door on the other side.'

Bertie, Ginger at his heels, dashed round. The door was open. Bertie sprang in, almost at once to fall out, locked in close embrace with a coloured man who looked scarcely human. His face was distorted by a fanatical grin, lips drawn back to show the teeth. Lank black hair reached to his shoulders. Sparse wisps of hair hung from his chin.

Leaving Bertie to wrestle with this unnatural creature, Ginger jumped into the cockpit and switched off, his first thought, of course, being to prevent the aircraft running away and damaging itself. As the engines died he leapt out again to help Bertie, who seemed to be having a hard time. Biggles also came round to lend a hand, while Chintoo, *parang* raised, hopped about looking for a chance to strike.

Ginger tried to get a hold on arm or leg. He found them, but was unable to get a grip. The man was like a bundle of eels. Apparently the others had the same difficulty, for the man seemed able to fling them off by some trick of judo. As fast as they threw themselves on him, so were they hurled aside. At last the man, finding himself clear, tore away along the beach, leaving his only garment, a loin cloth, lying at the scene of the struggle. Bertie and Ginger ran after him, but seeing they had no chance of catching him soon gave up. Only Chintoo went on.

Biggles dashed to where he had dropped his rifle when he grabbed the wing. He raised it, but did not shoot, either because Chintoo was in line with the fugitive or he questioned the justification of killing a man who appeared to be out of his mind. The man disappeared into the jungle at the far end of the beach with Chintoo still in hot pursuit.

Biggles picked up the rag the man had dropped. 'Looks like the remains of a Japanese shirt,' he observed. He got into the cockpit and after a minute or two emerged holding a revolver. 'Also Japanese,' he said. 'It was on the floor. I think, Bertie, you were lucky. You might well have got a Japanese bullet.'

‘Is everything all right?’ asked Ginger anxiously.

‘As far as I can see. He wanted to use the machine, not damage it.’

Still breathing heavily from their violent exertions, and obviously shaken by the shock of the whole thing, they looked at each other.

After a minute Bertie said: ‘I must say that was a bit of a corker. What do you make of it, Biggles, old boy?’

Biggles shrugged helplessly. ‘I haven’t a clue.’

‘What did the fellow intend to do? He was charging straight into the sea.’

‘It looked to me as if he intended taking off.’

‘He wouldn’t have been as crazy as that.’

‘Why not?’

‘But only a man who knew how to fly would do that!’

‘He may have been a pilot.’

‘That’s impossible.’

‘He knew how to start the engines, anyhow; and only a man with some knowledge of aero engines would have been able to do that. It’s my belief he would have taken the machine off had we not come along. Had he merely wanted to damage it he could have done so without starting the engines. That wasn’t the idea. He wanted the plane.’

Ginger spoke. ‘You think he was a Jap?’

‘He looked like one. This gun was made in Japan. I know the type. The maker’s mark is on it. And to clinch it, I think, the fellow was a ju-jitsu expert, a form of wrestling peculiar to Japan.’

‘But what in the name of all that’s fantastic would a Jap be doing here? He looked as if he’d been here a long time.’

‘It’s no use asking me. He may be a relic of the war, when the Japs occupied the whole area.’

‘Oh, have a heart,’ protested Bertie. ‘You can’t really believe that. Why *should* he stay here?’

‘I could believe it. After the war a lot of Japanese troops in Borneo, and the islands of what were then the Dutch East Indies, refused to surrender, being convinced they’d be shot. Up to a few years ago there were still some who couldn’t believe Japan had lost the war. This fellow could be such a case. He was crazy, anyhow. But never mind how he came to be here. What matters to us is, he’s here.’

To think he must have been here all the time!’ put in Ginger in a shocked voice. ‘Why didn’t the Salones tell us? They said there was a wild man on Shark Island. Are we to believe there are two of ’em? Oh no. One would be remarkable, but two...’

‘I’ll tell you the answer,’ said Bertie. ‘There’s been a misunderstanding. The Salones forgot which island the man was on. They said Shark Island, when in fact they meant Kampong. With the two islands so close together it would be easy to make the mistake. As Ginger says, there can’t be two lunatics floating about.’

‘We could go on guessing for a week and still be wrong,’ said Biggles.
‘Here comes Chintoo. He may be able to throw light on the mystery.’

The Malay hurried back along the beach to rejoin them.

‘Did you catch him?’ asked Biggles.

‘No, Tuan. He hides in jungle. But I catch his boat.’

‘Boat? What boat?’

‘When he runs from here he goes to little boat made of sticks and canvas. Before he can put it on water he sees I am too close and will kill him. So he leaves boat and runs in jungle. I break hole in boat. Now he must stay here.’

‘You think he came here in the boat?’

‘Yes, Tuan. From Shark Island. Not Salone canoe. Boat he makes himself I think.’

‘I begin to see daylight,’ said Biggles. ‘When we flew close past Shark Island he was there. He saw us and watched the machine land here. He took a fancy to the aircraft and paddled across in his home-made boat to snatch it.’ Biggles turned back to Chintoo. ‘Did you see him arrive?’

‘No. I am cooking rice when engines start. I look. When plane moves I run after it.’

‘What sort of man was he?’

‘Japanese man. I see plenty.’

Bertie chipped in. ‘Just a tick. Let me get this straight. Do I understand this raving idiot is now running loose on this island?’

‘That’s what Chintoo says.’

‘A charming thought to go to bed with,’ declared Bertie. ‘I call that really wizard.’

‘If he’s the man who was on Shark Island, and Chintoo thinks he is, he won’t be able to take pot shots at us when we land there.’

‘It won’t be necessary if he cuts our throats here, while we’re asleep.’

‘How you do carry on,’ reproved Biggles. ‘Can’t you see this is all to the good? The obvious thing to do is change places. Our barmy companion can stay here, leaving us to explore Shark Island in peace.’

‘When?’

‘Right away. Why not? We’re finished here. Shark Island was the next on our list. We know from the Salones there’s at least one wreck there. It may be the one. Let’s have a look at it. We’ll have something to eat and move over. We should manage it comfortably before dark.’

‘What about the fellow who’s landed himself here?’ queried Bertie.

‘What about him?’

‘Isn’t he liable to starve to death?’

‘He seems to have managed pretty well so far; I don’t think we need worry about him,’ decided Biggles. ‘Let’s get loaded up.’

CHAPTER 14

THE BIG QUESTION

By the time the camp had been cleared up and everything required put on board the day was dying, and with the breeze falling the palms of the towering coconuts were coming to rest. However, it was only a short hop across to Shark Island, and on arrival there was still just sufficient time for a quick reconnaissance. Biggles flew round the island and across it, but the light had too far gone for details to be observed.

However, it could be seen that Shark Island bore no resemblance to the one they had just left. Its shape was long and narrow, with a prominent head at one end and tailing off to a reef at the other; which gave it the appearance of a giant tadpole. Except at the high point, which dropped sheer into the sea, most of the coastline was beach, so landing presented no difficulty. The bulk of the island was as usual blanketed with a tangle of jungle.

‘Could this island be volcanic?’ asked Ginger, as they taxied up the beach.

‘I don’t know. Possibly. Why?’

‘I thought I saw a faint smudge of smoke rising.’

‘I’d think it more likely to be a fire made by the man who’s been living here. He wouldn’t waste matches, even if he has any, so I imagine he’d keep a fire going all the time, probably near the spot where he slept. No doubt he built a hut of sorts. It would be common sense to heap up the fire with green stuff, when not in use, to keep it smouldering.’

The aircraft was parked in a safe place, well above the tide mark, towards the tail end of the island, now seen as a chaos of rocks of diminishing size, either the result of erosion or a landslide in the distant past. It was decided not to unload the machine, but take out only those things that would be required for the night; groundsheets, mosquito nets, food and water.

‘If we take everything out we shall only have to put it back tomorrow,’ Biggles said. ‘You realize this is the end of the trail, the last island with the possible exception of Elephant Island—for the time being, at all events. Petrol is getting close to danger point. As it is, we’ve only about enough to scrape through to Penang. If we don’t find the *Vagabond* here I shall pack up until we get fresh orders. I’m not taking any chances of spending months on one of these islands like the wretched fellow who’s been living here.’

‘If you want to know what I think I’ll tell you,’ volunteered Bertie dispassionately. ‘The whole business was daft from the start. There are too many bally islands and not enough wrecks. We could spend the rest of our lives marching up and down these beaches, like the blooming crabs, without finding enough money to pay Chin-Chin his wages.’

‘Will you stop moaning?’ requested Biggles. ‘There’s a wreck here somewhere. A wooden ship. The Salones said so. If they could see it so can

we. Tomorrow, in daylight, we'll comb the place till we find it. If it turns out not to be the Vagabond I shall hit the breeze for Penang. I'm as browned off with this wild-goose hunt as you are. When we've had some supper we'll turn in. Ginger, you can take the first guard.'

Ginger frowned. 'Guard? Is that necessary?'

'Probably not, but it's better to be safe than sorry.'

'If you're thinking of that lunatic on Kampong Island he can't get back. Chintoo knocked a hole in his boat, and however daft he may be he wouldn't be such a twit as to try swimming back here through water stiff with sharks.'

'So many things have happened, that shouldn't have happened, on this cock-eyed expedition, that I'm taking no chances.'

That was all. After a stew of corned beef and rice, with mugs of cocoa, they settled down for the night, Ginger sitting on a little mound of sand with the rifle across his knees.

In the event nothing happened. The night passed without incident, but it was not long before one occurred to put new heart into the party.

While Chintoo was getting breakfast ready, Ginger, who had not forgotten the clue of a little heap of shells that was thought to mark the spot where the outcast Salone had camped, decided to take a walk along the beach behind the high-water mark to check if the old man had been to Shark Island. Since finding his first sovereign he had done this on other beaches, but without success. Failure is always discouraging and he did not seriously expect to find anything; but during his night watch he had remembered two things that might be associated. The original Salone found by Mac had been shot. The strange creature who had been living on Shark Island had a gun. The significance could not be overlooked.

Without saying anything to the others, Ginger strolled away along the sand, keeping close to the fringe of jungle. His delight can be imagined when, before he had gone far, his questing eyes lighted on a disc of yellow metal. He snatched it up. It was a sovereign, as bright as if just issued from the mint. How had it got there? He could see no limpet shells.

He put the coin in his pocket and walked on, fully expecting to find a heap of empty shells. Instead, he found another sovereign, and a little later, another. Still he went on, eyes active, trying to solve the mystery of this trail of gold. The only conclusion he could come to was that someone had walked along the beach carrying sovereigns, probably in a container of some sort. This must have had a hole in it, with the result that from time to time one of the coins had fallen out.

This led to another thought. No one who knew the value of money would be so careless as to lose coins in this way. This could only be the work of the old Salone. He had at some time walked along here carrying a bag or a basket of sovereigns. Fantastic though it seemed, like an incident in a fairy tale, it was the only explanation. The point was, where did the trail start and where did it end? Why did the old man carry the money about, anyway? How many

coins had he in his bag? He would not be able to carry the entire consignment of twenty thousand.

In all Ginger found seven sovereigns before the climax was reached, when his theory was at once confirmed. Here was the heap of empty shells. Near them lay a heap of sovereigns, looking as if they had been tipped out carelessly from a receptacle. There were other things, too. Trembling a little from excitement, Ginger squatted down to examine them. There was a flat stone. Beside it lay a smaller stone with a rusty nail beside it. There was a short piece of cord, much frayed, also some sinews taken from he knew not what animal or fish. These things, which might have been expected, made the picture clear and complete. Somewhere, not far away, the old Salone had found the money. Taking some, he had sat here to punch holes through the coins to fashion for himself a crude necklace.

It did not need a master-mind to work this out, but then a question arose. Why had the old man not completed his task? Why had he left the rest of the sovereigns lying here? Twenty or thirty, at least. Why had he left his nail and the sinews on which apparently he had intended to thread more coins?

Ginger thought he had found the answer when he examined a patch of discoloured sand. It went down for about two inches. What was it? Could it be a bloodstain? If so it would explain why the old man had fled leaving everything behind. Someone had shot him. Why? But that was not important. Wounded, the old man had run to his canoe—he must have had one to reach the island—and pushed off. He had escaped, only to die in his boat, which had drifted to where it had been found by Mac.

It struck Ginger there was one item missing, one thing necessary to complete the picture. The bag or basket in which the old man had carried the money. He must have needed one. Practically naked, he would have no pockets and he certainly could not have carried all these coins in his hands. Could it have been blown away? Ginger got up and looked along the most likely place for it to have been stopped. The edge of the jungle. What appeared to be a piece of discoloured rag caught his eye. Pulling it out he found it to be stiff. It had a familiar smell. Raising it to his nostrils, his eyes went round with wonder. The smell was dope. What he held was a piece of aeroplane fabric.

It was about two feet square with edges that looked as if they had been hacked with a blunt knife. The knife had slipped, causing a tear; probably the hole through which some of the coins had escaped, reasoned Ginger. How a piece of aeroplane fabric came to be there was the biggest mystery of all. Ginger gave it up. It was time Biggles knew about this.

Smoothing his handkerchief flat on the ground, he piled the sovereigns in it, tied the corners, and with a smile of satisfaction on his face walked quickly back to camp.

‘Come on,’ greeted Biggles curtly. ‘We’ve been waiting for you. What have you been playing at?’

‘Playing is the word,’ returned Ginger, trying to keep a straight face. ‘I won some money.’

‘What money? What are you talking about?’

‘You’d better fasten your safety belts because you’re going to take a bump.’ Ginger put the handkerchief on the sand, unfastened the corners and exposed the contents.

No one said a word.

‘Well, what about it?’ prompted Ginger, grinning. ‘Aren’t you going to say thank you?’

Biggles seemed to have difficulty in finding his voice. ‘Have you found the wreck?’

‘No.’

‘Then where did this come from?’

This was the old Salone’s private hoard. He must have found the wreck.’

‘We knew that already.’

‘It must be here somewhere. Here’s the nail he used to punch holes to make his necklace. I fancy he was shot here.’ Ginger told his story from the beginning.

‘You’re right. That can only mean the *Vagabond* is on Shark Island,’ declared Biggles. ‘All we have to do is find it. Good show, Ginger.’

‘Before we rush off madly in all directions, you’d better have a look at this,’ said Ginger, producing the piece of plane fabric which he had folded and put inside his shirt.

Biggles took it. He stared. ‘Where the devil did you get this?’

‘I think it was what the old man carried the money in. It was lying close by. Don’t ask me where *he* got it.’

After a pause Biggles said: ‘I’ll tell you. Somewhere on this island there’s a crashed aircraft. There must be. And I’ll tell you something else. The pilot who crashed it is still alive.’

‘I get it,’ murmured Bertie. ‘He was here, but now he’s on Kampong. Right?’

‘Right. But we can forget about him. Let’s find the *Vagabond*.’

‘Are you going to fly?’ asked Ginger.

‘Yes. The wreck must be on top of the ground or the Salone wouldn’t have found it. Let’s get weaving. Put that money in the locker.’

In a few minutes the *Gadfly* was in the air, and even before the search had really begun the lost schooner was spotted within half a mile of where they had spent the night. It lay jammed, almost on even keel, among the rocks and big boulders that formed the tail of the island. It had, of course, been dismantled, and the deck had been washed clear, which would account for it not having been seen from the beach.

Biggles landed the aircraft at the nearest possible place. Ginger hooked the anchor in the sand and together they splashed through shallow water to the wreck. Its name, *Vagabond*, could still be seen in faded letters on the bows.

‘It’s her,’ cried Bertie. ‘Now for the jolly old shekels.’

Although nothing was said, it is likely that doubts began to arise as soon as they went below. The ship had been stripped clean, not only of everything portable; all fixtures, even the cabin doors, had been carried away. The Vagabond was, in fact, as empty as a drum. What they now feared confronted them in what must have been the captain’s cabin. On the floor were two wooden boxes with a handle at each end. There had been locks, but these had been prised off. Stencilled in white letters on the lids of the boxes was the name of a famous bank. Both boxes were open. They were empty.

Biggles tapped a cigarette on a thumb nail. ‘You know what I think of treasure hunting,’ he said evenly. ‘Now you know why.’

‘So that confounded old Salone lifted the lot?’ muttered Bertie.

‘I don’t think so.’

‘But it’s all gone. You can see for yourself.’

‘I’m not disputing that. But I don’t think the Salone was responsible.’

‘Why not?’

‘In the first place I can’t see how he could have busted the locks. That would need a metal tool. What would he do with all that money, anyway? The limit of his intelligence was to hang a few round his neck. There were twenty thousand sovereigns in these boxes. I haven’t worked out how much they would weigh altogether, but the weight would be considerable. That’s why handles were put on the boxes. Would the Salone hump that lot around? I don’t think so. He was satisfied with a few.’

‘Then what’s the answer?’

‘Several men may have been here since the ship was cast ashore, but we know of only one. He’s now on Kampong Island. How long he was here we don’t know, but it wouldn’t have to be long for him to find the wreck. He’d find the money. Would he leave it here? No. He’d put it somewhere else. We might dig up the entire island without finding it.’

‘Is there *anything* we can do about it?’ asked Bertie. ‘If not we might as well go home and forget it.’

‘I’m not giving up yet,’ answered Biggles. ‘We may have one chance left. The man who found the money wouldn’t carry it farther than was necessary—unless of course he had a ship in the offing. I rule out the old Salone, although I’m puzzled to know how he got hold of a piece of aeroplane fabric. All I can think of is, somewhere on the island there’s a crashed plane and the old man found it. For the moment I shall assume the lunatic Jap found the gold. I admit there’s a weak spot there. You may say, if he found the cash how did the Salone get a bag full? There must be an answer to that, but I shan’t try to guess it. All right. The Jap found the sovereigns. Naturally he’d take them away. Where? It’s reasonable to suppose he’d hide them close to where he lived, so that he could keep an eye on them. What we have to do now is find his living quarters. There isn’t much ground to cover, so that shouldn’t be too difficult. We might as well try it. Sitting here staring at the empty boxes won’t

help us. Ginger, where did you see that smoke yesterday?’

Ginger pointed. ‘There. Unless my eyes are fooling me I can still see a faint suspicion.’

Biggles had a long look. ‘I can see it. There’s something else there, too, but I can’t make out what it is. Let’s investigate.’

The Gadfly was taken back to the beach and they set off along the shore to get as close as possible to the source of the smoke without having to force a passage through the jungle. The proposition was simplified when, nearly opposite the smoke, they came upon a well-trodden path running in the right direction. It was obviously not an accident, and it was hardly necessary for Ginger to remark that this must be the track made by the castaway in his journeys to and from the rocks below.

The rest was easy. A five-minute scramble up a fairly steep bank brought them to a small area of level ground. On it stood a strange contraption that brought them to a halt while they considered all its implications.

Ginger was the first to speak. Looking at Biggles he said, simply: ‘So you were right.’

Before them was a structure clearly intended to be a shelter, a hut, a dwelling. Something of the sort had been expected. What was remarkable were the materials that had been used for its construction. They were the remains of an aeroplane, the wings, fuselage, rudder and elevators having been propped up by bamboos to form something reminiscent of a Red Indian wigwam. Conspicuous near the entrance was the red Rising Sun device of Japanese military aircraft. The piece concerned had once been the underside of a wing tip. Near by the ashes of a fire smouldered.

‘A Nakajima fighter,’ said Biggles softly. ‘It’s a long time since I saw one of those. It gives us a rough idea of how long the Jap has been here. This is where he crashed and set up house with what remained of his machine. Poor devil. No wonder he went round the bend. When we get home we’ll report this. No doubt someone will be sent along to pick him up. I don’t feel like tackling that job myself. With a bit of luck he could have got away.’

‘How?’

‘In our machine. It’s my guess he saw us go past and land at Kampong Island. He had made himself a little boat Chintoo said it was made of bamboo and canvas. I’d say it was aeroplane fabric, which, being doped, would be waterproof. He came across hoping to pinch our plane, and he nearly got away with it. One can’t make allowances for that sort of thing. Let’s have a look inside.’

They went in. There was not much to see. A large rock that had evidently been used as a seat or a table. A cushion that had once filled the seat in the cockpit. On one side, kept off the ground by pieces of struts and longerons, was a heap of dry fern fronds arranged as a bed.

Said Biggles, looking around: ‘If he didn’t bury the sovereigns this is where he’d bring them. If so there’s only one place where he could put them

out of sight.' Crossing to the bed he tilted up the end. This exposed a number of bags made of aeroplane fabric. Each was gathered in and tied neatly at the top with a piece of cord. He picked up one, and carrying it as if it was heavy dropped it in the middle of the floor. The sound it made was a soft chink. He cut the cord, folded back the edges of the fabric, and there lay a heap of sovereigns. He looked up. 'Well, there it is,' he said with a whimsical smile.

'It's pretty plain now to see what happened here,' observed Ginger. 'The Jap found the gold. He brought it here in small consignments, easy to carry, in pieces of fabric. One day the old Salone lands here. Walking along to the rocks to get some limpets he spots the path. He had to see where it led. That brought him here. The Jap must have been out. The old man finds the gold and helps himself to a bag. Back on the beach near his canoe he has a feed of limpets and amuses himself by making a necklace. He was still sitting there when the Jap spots him, shoots him, but doesn't kill him. Wounded, leaving everything, the old man bolts to his canoe and gets away, only to die later.'

Biggles nodded. 'I'd say that's the story as near as if we'd seen it happen.'

'But why did the Jap have to shoot the poor old boy?' asked Bertie indignantly.

'The old Salone wasn't an exception,' reminded Biggles. 'According to the men we spoke to he made a habit of shooting at anyone who landed here.'

'Why should he?'

'Maybe he was out of his mind. Maybe he didn't want visitors who might see what he had under his bed, so he discouraged them by shooting at them. But we can talk about this later. We've got to get this money home. We'll start by getting it to the machine. It'll mean more than one journey.'

Biggles counted the bags. There were fifteen. The sizes varied, as would, therefore, the weight of coins in each. Apparently for want of any other container the Jap pilot had used pieces of fabric cut from his plane, taking them from wherever was most convenient or from places where they would be least likely to affect his shelter. The gaps could be seen. It looked as if the Salone had taken the smallest.

Biggles picked up a bag and made a grimace. 'I'm not happy about all this weight,' he said dubiously.

'Do you mean you don't think the machine will carry it?' questioned Ginger.

'Oh yes, she'll lift it all right; but we shall have to go steady. In a bad bump one of these bags, or all of them, might go through the floor. That has happened to more than one plane with a concentrated weight like this. I remember some years ago an old Imperial Airways machine with a load of gold bars, running into choppy weather, arrived at Croydon without its load, having scattered it half-way across Kent. It had gone through the floor. All we can do is distribute the weight evenly as near the centre of gravity as possible. That'll help to keep the machine trimmed too. Let's get on.'

Everyone picked up a bag in each hand, taking the largest. They went out.

Ginger, who was first, stopped short. ‘Oh no,’ he cried. ‘Look what’s coming.’

Speeding across the blue water towards Kampong Island was a white-painted launch.

CHAPTER 15

THE LAST ROUND

‘So Yomas has caught up with us,’ observed Biggles calmly. ‘Those two Salones we spoke to at Mergui must have talked. They’d see no harm in it.’

‘They’d remember the questions we asked about islands where there were wrecks,’ put in Bertie.

‘Of course.’

‘The launch seems to be making for Kampong.’

‘It is. But it won’t take Yomas long to discover we aren’t there.’

‘He’ll see we’ve been there.’

‘And as we didn’t stay he’ll guess we found nothing. Then he’ll come on here. We don’t want him panting down our necks. We’ve no time to lose. Don’t forget that launch carries a sting, and Yomas will be prepared to use it. We’d better keep going. This looks like ending in a race.’

The little procession of three men, each carrying a small fortune wrapped up in what looked like pieces of dirty rag, hastened on down the path. As far as it was possible without risking a fall or treading on a snake, all eyes were on the launch as it went on, without altering course, towards the beach which the Gadfly had used on Kampong Island. It could be seen as a pale strip against the sombre background of the vegetation.

At half-way they paused for breath, for the loads were heavy. ‘Shall I be glad to get rid of this stuff!’ muttered Biggles, as they went on. ‘I never did like having any truck with gold. After sweating through this jungle with a load I shall like it even less.’

‘What about the crazy Jap?’ queried Bertie.

‘What about him?’

‘Yomas might bump into him, or he might have a crack at Yomas.’

‘That would be all to the good. It might delay Yomas coming here. If they fight, so much the better for us. That would be their worry. We have enough on our plate.’

They saw the launch reach the island. Some men went ashore. Yomas in his white uniform was conspicuous.

‘To save time talking when we get to the machine, this is how we’ll handle it,’ said Biggles, as with perspiration streaming down their faces they stumbled on over the rough ground. ‘Chintoo can go back with you to fetch the rest of the bags. I shall stay to stow this first lot and make ready for a quick take-off. I shall do everything except start the engines. They might be heard across the water.’

Nothing more was said and in a few minutes they were dropping their loads besides the aircraft. Chintoo had seen the launch and was watching it with anxiety written on his brown face. Without wasting words, Biggles told

him to go with the others to help to bring down another load.

Bertie and Ginger had a quick drink of water and set off again, taking Chintoo with them.

Biggles's last orders were: 'If the launch looks like getting here before you, dump everything in the jungle and run for it. We daren't risk being caught. If we were we'd lose the machine. Don't stop for anything.'

Still keeping an eye on the launch, he busied himself with the aircraft. First he threw out the tent, and anything else not likely to be required, primarily to reduce weight. This done, he stowed the bags of gold in the fore part of the cabin, placed firmly so that they would not be likely to move even in a tight turn. The *Gadfly*, in accordance with the usual practice, had been parked facing the direction of takeoff, so there was nothing more he could do except have everything ready in the cockpit. All the time he watched the launch, prepared to start up should it make a move towards Shark Island. After that he could only wait, exercising his patience.

Time passed, a long time, it seemed, during which he divided his attention between the island opposite and the direction from which the others would return. He was expecting to see them at any moment when what he knew to be inevitable happened. The launch began to move. In a minute it was kicking up a foaming bow wave as it sped towards Shark Island and the beach on which he stood. He had a suspicion that the aircraft, which was, of course, standing in the open, had at last been spotted. He estimated that the launch would not take more than five or six minutes to get across.

As keeping the engines silent would no longer serve any useful purpose, he climbed into the cockpit and started them. Leaving them ticking over, he jumped out again.

It was at this crucial moment that Chintoo came into sight carrying his load in his sarong slung over a shoulder. Close behind came Bertie and Ginger, staggering, more than was necessary, it seemed, with their bags. They too, it turned out, had seen what was happening.

Biggles dashed to help them with their loads. 'Chuck everything inside, get in yourselves and shut the door,' he ordered tersely as they reached the aircraft. 'We're away.'

A quick glance as he dived into the cockpit showed the launch a quarter of a mile away.

The engines raised their voices. The aircraft ran down the beach to float on the water. The wheels came up. The engines bellowed. The *Gadfly*, gashing a line of creamy foam across the surface of the blue water, unstuck, and soared into the air, just clearing the launch. The risk of collision had always been apparent, but there was nothing Biggles could do about it. It would have been an even greater risk to turn the heavily loaded machine, near the water, while it still barely had flying speed. A wing tip would only have had to touch the sea to bring disaster.

Climbing, Biggles went on. He did not look back.

Presently Ginger joined him. 'That was what you might call touch and go,' he remarked, smiling.

'Are you telling me,' returned Biggles grimly. 'You were a heck of a long time away. What happened? When you came into sight you were rolling like you were drunk.'

'So would you if you ever tried running through bushes with the pockets of your shorts full of sovereigns,' answered Ginger.

He explained. While they were running down the hill he had dropped one of his bags. It had burst open. The contents had, of course, fallen out. Pressed for time, it would have taken too long to refill and tie up the bag. All he and Bertie could do was scoop up the coins and stuff them in their pockets. He admitted a few might have been lost.

'Where have you put them now?' asked Biggles.

'Most of 'em are on the floor. I left Bertie picking them up. When we looked like ending up in the drink we got rid of 'em, anyhow, as fast as we could. That weight in our pockets wouldn't have made swimming any easier.'

'The sooner we get rid of the accursed stuff altogether the better,' asserted Biggles. 'Give me a course for Singapore. I think we might just do it. If we look like running short we shall have to call at Penang. That's in Malaya, so Yomas can't touch us there.'

Little more remains to be told. It turned out that the *Gadfly* just managed to reach the marine aircraft base at Singapore. There Biggles went at once to Government House and reported what he had on board. The result of this was within an hour an army jeep had collected the gold and taken it to the bank where it had previously been deposited. Biggles watched it go with the remark: 'Good riddance. I never feel entirely happy flying with that sort of cargo.'

They were delighted to find the *Alora* there, and still more pleased when Mac told them his owners had been in touch with the Burmese Government and everything had been straightened out. Biggles paid him for his services and the last stores he had bought for them. He also promised that when he got to London and made his report he would press for a substantial reward to be made to the Captain of the *Alora*, without whose help the gold might well have been lost for ever.

'So now you'll be going back to England,' said Mac, as they had a meal together the next day.

'Yes, but not direct,' answered Biggles. 'First I shall have to slip up to Victoria Point to take Chintoo home. When you find yourself working with a reliable chap like that it makes nonsense of this colour-bar argument.'

'I discovered that years ago,' said Mac, stuffing tobacco in his pipe. 'There's no need for you to go out of your way. I'm sailing tomorrow. I shall be calling at Victoria Point. Chintoo can come with me. I can do with an extra hand.'

This was agreed. So Chintoo, the man who had become more than a willing servant, was paid off, with a considerable bonus. When they last saw him he was buying presents for his wife and children. Naturally, Laon, the *Alora's* Malay bosun, who had been so helpful, was not forgotten.

The last thing Biggles did before leaving for home was to call at the office of the resident Japanese official and report the presence either on Kampong or Shark Island of a castaway. Whether or not anything was done about this was never learned; so for how long the unfortunate man had been there, or how he came to be there in the first place, was not known.

Two other men of whom nothing more was heard were Yomas and Feng. Not that Biggles had any further interest in them. He suspected they had decided to keep their mouths shut, because it would be difficult for them to say anything officially without revealing what they hoped to gain.

Biggles sent a signal to the Air Commodore from Singapore reporting the success of the enterprise and then without haste, and without any trouble, took the *Gadfly* back to England.

THE END